

# RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND  
END OF SEASON 2024

ENABLING  
OUR PLAYERS  
TO THRIVE



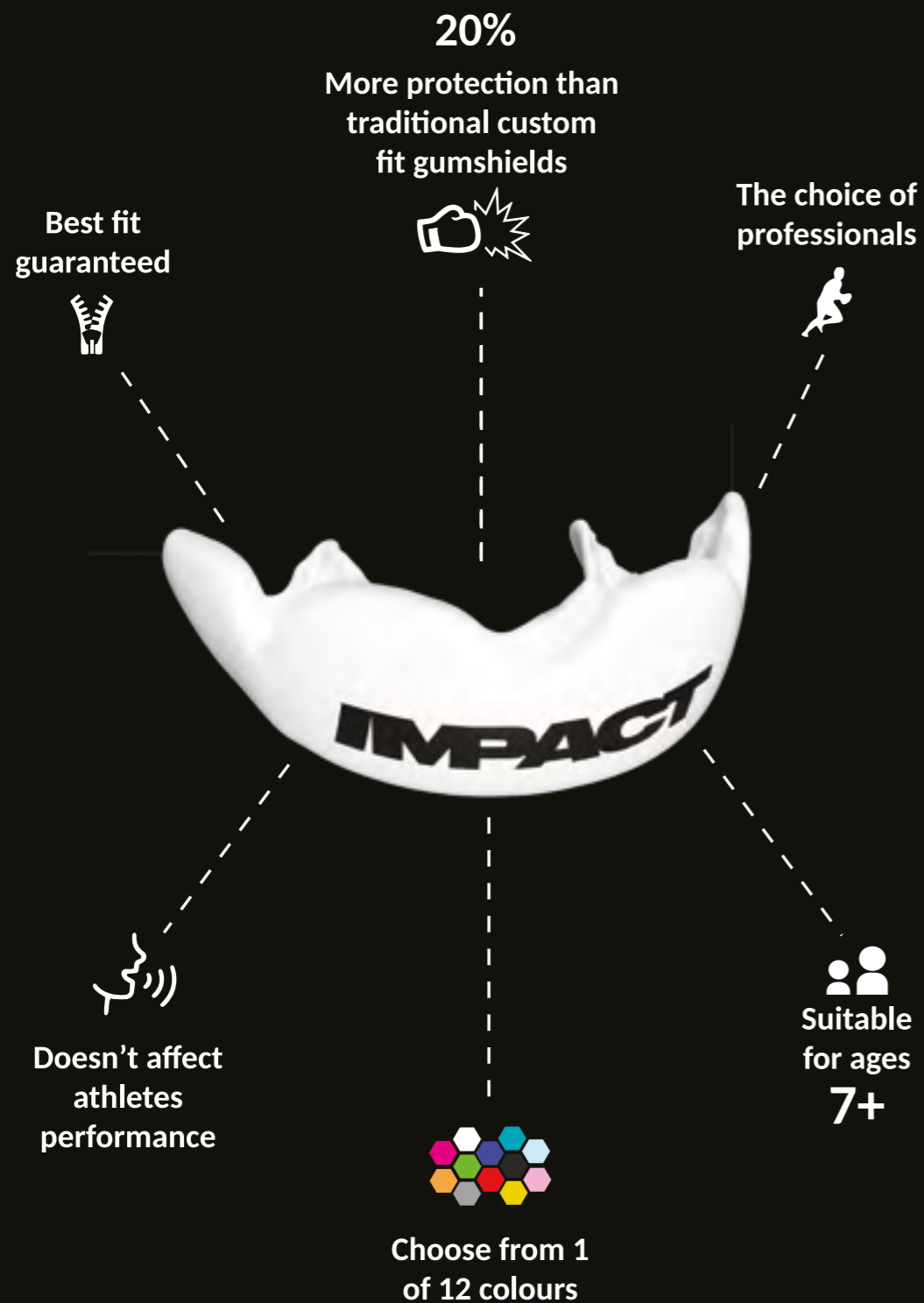
ELITE  
BALANCE  
*EIMEAR CORRI*

A TRANSCENDING  
INFLUENCE  
*KEITH EARLS*



RUGBY PLAYERS  
IRELAND

# IMPACT GUMSHIELDS



## WORLD'S FIRST 3D PRINTED GUMSHIELD

TO FIND OUT MORE OR MAKE A CLUB/SCHOOL BOOKING:

✉ james@impactgumshields.com    ☎ +35385 254 4644    🌐 www.impactgumshields.com



# CONTENTS

- 2** Represent - CEO Address
- 4** News - Rugby Players Ireland
- 6** News - RPI Awards 2024
- 8** News - Brain Health Service
- 10** Develop - Diarmuid Kilgallen
- 14** Engage - Eoin Lowry
- 17** Engage - TYF Schools
- 18** Engage - TYF Update
- 20** Develop - More Than A Player
- 24** Develop - Eimear Corri
- 26** Develop - Jarrad Butler
- 30** Develop - Deirdre Lyons
- 34** Develop - GRPF
- 36** Develop - Retirements
- 38** Engage - Keith Earls

### Directors:

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

## CREDITS

### Published by:

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

**Phone:** +353 1 676 9680

**Email:** info@rugbyplayersireland.ie

**Web:** www.rugbyplayersireland.ie

**Facebook:** facebook.com/RugbyPlayersIreland

**Twitter:** @RugbyPlayersIRE

**Instagram:** @rugbyplayersireland

**LinkedIn:** www.linkedin.com/company/irupa

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

Written & Edited by: Richard McElwee & Finola Roache

Design by: Brian Gillis & Laura Wilkinson

© RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND 2024. Text and imagery may not be reproduced without permission.



# ENABLING OUR PLAYERS TO THRIVE

CEO Address

**SIMON KEOGH**



## A time to reflect.

Despite heartbreak at the Rugby World Cup, our men's side led by Johnny Sexton inspired a nation through some heroic performances in France. While many feared the squad might suffer from something of a hangover, they instead powered on to win their second successive Six Nations title.

Later this year we'll return to Paris to as both Irish Sevens sides take their place at the Olympics. It follows a year of podium finishes on the SVNS Series stage, while our Women's XV's third place finish in the Six Nations has secured their place at the Rugby World Cup next year.

Elsewhere, Leinster took Toulouse to extra time in the Champions Cup Final while three of our provinces contested the latter stages of the URC.

These successes will form the basis of our memories of the 2023/24 campaign. However, I want to reflect on some of the achievements away from the game - accomplishments that we believe enable our members to thrive on the field. Our vision at Rugby Players Ireland is to make Ireland the best place in the world to play rugby, and this year, we have made significant strides in that direction.

Foremost among these achievements was the establishment of a Brain Health Service, delivered in partnership between Rugby Players Ireland and World Rugby. This first-of-its-kind initiative demonstrates the trust that the wider game's key stakeholders have in the Irish players' association.

After launching the service, I was asked in an interview if the service implied that rugby has a problem with head injuries, noting that other sports had not taken similar measures. However, at Rugby Players Ireland we are not simply ticking a box. We never do. We genuinely care about our players and their welfare, and this initiative is our proactive approach to addressing the issue.

We also continue to work closely with the IRFU on various matters. Our world-leading Player Development Programme, a joint venture that prioritises the person before the player, creates a holistic environment within our squad groups. This year, we concluded our Collective Bargaining discussions after months of negotiation, further underlining our vision.

We are hugely proud of our Tackle Your Feelings Campaign, which we run in partnership with Zurich Ireland and the Z



Foundation. Our Tackle Your Feelings schools programme has been rolled out in over 150 schools and continues to grow with a host of developments to the curriculum and content.

Underpinning the great work of the players' association is our Executive Board. With representatives from across the country, and the off-field experience of Maura Quinn, Peter McKenna, and Ciarán Medlar, we have a group who continue to sacrifice their own time for the betterment of Irish rugby players.

I am especially indebted to our chairperson, Peter O'Mahony and I was personally delighted to see sense prevail recently. It is reassuring to know that we will be able to count on Pete's leadership on and off the field into next season, and maybe beyond.

Speaking at our recent Awards event, Pete spoke about his initial apprehension when stepping into the role of Chairperson following Rob Kearney's retirement. He also mentioned the expectation of a player to make a commitment to leave their jersey in a better place than they found it.

Pete can be immensely proud of Rugby Players Ireland's achievements this year, and the legacy he is forging for future generations. Yet it was also Pete who reminded us that a legacy isn't simply about what a player does with a number on their back, or with a title by their name.

While we have taken home plenty of silverware this season, ultimately our work as a players' association is defined by the people we see in the reflection of those trophies.

We will continue to see our members as more than players and work towards sustaining an environment that enables Irish Rugby and its people to thrive.





# RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND NEWS



## PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT CAMP

Organised in partnership with the IRFU, our Personal Development Camp for the Irish Women's XVs and Sevens programmes provided insights into the expectations and realities of being an elite rugby player with an added focus on life away from the game. Hosted by Druids Glen Hotel & Golf Resort and led by Aoife Lane and Aaron Buggle, the camp was the first of its kind for these squad groups.



## WORLD PLAYER DEVELOPMENT CONFERENCE 2024

Rugby Players Ireland had a strong presence at the 7th World Player Development Conference. Led by Pamela Gilpin, Head of Player Development & Wellbeing at World Players, the Conference hosted over 100 representatives from across the world of sport in Arizona.

Dr Deirdre Lyons and Aoife Lane were amongst those in attendance for a range of sessions to discuss how players' associations support can adapting their programmes to meet the changes and challenges players face in their lives.



## GLOBAL RUGBY PLAYERS FOUNDATION

Several of the game's legendary figures have come together to form the Global Rugby Players Foundation which aims to empower retired rugby players to lead healthy and fulfilling lives after they leave the game. It seeks to reframe the concept of retirement by looking at it as a positive challenge and

an opportunity for people to forge new careers, build new connections and expand their identity.

Rugby Players Ireland has been chosen as one of the first to lead out the new charity's programme which will provide a range of holistic supports using local solutions (see page 34 for more).

## IRISH ATHLETES ALLIANCE

The formation of the Irish Athletes Alliance, a pioneering initiative aimed at championing the rights, well-being, and professional development of elite Irish athletes marks a significant milestone in the Irish sporting landscape

Led by the Gaelic Players' Association, Rugby Players Ireland, the Irish Jockeys Association and the Professional Footballers' Association of Ireland, the Irish Athletes Alliance aims to serve as a voice and as a catalyst for positive change within Ireland's high-performance sporting community.

Upon the establishment of the Irish Athletes Alliance, Simon Keogh, CEO of Rugby Players Ireland said: "Traditionally, Irish sports have tended to forge their own way. However, as each sport has grown, so too has our recognition of shared challenges and opportunities. By pooling our resources, knowledge, and experiences, the Irish Athletes Alliance can further harness Ireland's vast sporting potential by working together to ensure our athletes have the support and resources they need to thrive.

"Working together we can ensure that the voice of elite athletes is at the centre of key decisions by all stakeholders in the sports sector. It is imperative that all our elite athletes have the same rights and opportunities as they strive to be the best they can be in their chosen sport."



## HerForm

New research has shown that the unique personal development needs of female athletes are not being adequately met. In response to this pressing issue, HerForm, an initiative funded by the European Commission and led by Rugby Players Ireland, has been established and will seek to empower and support high-performing female athletes throughout their sporting careers and beyond.

Initiated during the Covid-19 pandemic, research was first conducted to highlight the personal developmental needs of female elite athletes at that time. By engaging over 100 athletes from 17 different countries, it was determined that female athletes encounter different challenges ranging from the return-to-sport after childbirth, vocational development, negotiating a different contractual landscape and mental health management.

Upon the conclusion of its research, HerForm has placed its focus on the development of a digital training hub and a hybrid training curriculum for athlete support service providers. The digital platform will offer gender-specific, evidence-based training sessions targeting key areas identified in the research, while the hybrid curriculum will provide comprehensive guidance for practitioners supporting female athletes in high-performance environments.





# RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND AWARDS 2024



*It's always good to have a smile on your face. If you're not having fun then you're probably not enjoying it or playing well. I try to be myself as much as I can and if inspire a few kids on the way, all the better.*

**BUNDEE AKI**

BDO Ireland Men's XV's Players' Player of the Year 2024

*The girls have supported me through everything. Coming back [from injury] I wanted to do something for them so to be able to have done that feels pretty special.*

**AOIFE WAFER**

Strata Financial Women's XV's Players' Player of the Year 2024  
 Energia Women's XV's Young Player of the Year



*I've said it time and time again that Terry [Kennedy] is the GOAT while Harry [McNulty] is a stalwart of the Irish 7s and put us on the World Series. To be recognised in the same category as them is an honour in itself.*

**ZAC WARD**

TritonLake Men's 7s Players' Player of the Year



*It's such an honour to receive this award. It's a really special moment in my career, made even more special knowing it's coming from my teammates.*

**MEGAN BURNS**

TritonLake Women's 7s Players' Player of the Year

*The way I approach life is to throw myself into society and into communities and let it play out. Conversations happen. I was never afraid to get myself out there and be a normal person when everyone might have thought we were supposed to be these superstar rugby players.*

**KEITH EARLS**

Zurich Contribution to Irish Society Award

*The support that the players' association have given me throughout my career allowed me to prepare for life after rugby and has made the transition more manageable. It's still tough for any rugby player but all the help is invaluable.*

**JOHNNY SEXTON**

Presented with a commissioned Shane Monahan piece by Peter O'Mahony on behalf of Rugby Players Ireland



*I just want to keep enjoying my rugby, play as well as I can and keep representing Ireland and Leinster. They're my goals going forward.*

**JOE MCCARTHY**

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

*To be honest the Six Nations went by so quick it was almost tough to take in what was going on. I've had a good look back now... what an unbelievable experience!*

**CALVIN NASH**

Druids Glen Hotel & Golf Resort Moment of the Year

*I want to say a big thanks for all the girls who voted for me, they made my first Six Nations such an unreal experience.*

**KATIE CORRIGAN**

AIB Corporate Banking Women's XV's Try of the Year



*To be fair it was a good team try although Zebs told me it was all on him! Something that we've been working on at Munster is seeing that space early and taking it. Thankfully we did that and I'd working on those support lines. Luckily, I did that night.*

**CRAIG CASEY**

Mercedes-Benz Ballsbridge Men's XV's Try of the Year



# BRAIN HEALTH SERVICE

Together with World Rugby, Rugby Players Ireland have launched a new Brain Health Service to support former elite players who have concerns about their brain health. Since followed by Australia, Ireland was the first country in the world to launch the new initiative which is available to any retired player, male or female, who has played international 15s or 7s rugby, as well as any player who has played at a provincial level.

The first of its kind, the service includes an awareness and education component, an online questionnaire and tele-health delivered cognitive assessment with a trained brain health practitioner. This service assesses players for any brain health warning signs, provide advice on managing risk factors and signpost anyone in need of specialist care.

Players who do not display any warning signs are supported with the most up-to-date advice on keeping their brain health in-check and will also be advised of Rugby Players Ireland's broad range of services which are available to past players. These include mental wellbeing support, personal development initiatives, career guidance and community engagement opportunities.

Any player displaying warning signs of poor brain health will be referred to a specialist for further, in-person tests via their family doctor.

Chief Executive of Rugby Players Ireland Simon Keogh said "we aspire to be a world-leading players' association and are always looking for ways that we can support rugby players who have contributed so much to the success of the game in Ireland. We want to help them in leading healthy and fulfilling lives during and beyond their time in rugby.

"To this end we have been expanding our services into our growing past player network. Through our discussions with former players, it became clear that there was a heightened awareness of and sensitivity to brain health issues. While we have welcomed their appetite for greater knowledge in this space, it has also led to speculation and worry. It is our hope that the Brain Health Service will not only allay some of their fears but will also open the door to those who may be in need of further care."



PREMIUM HEALTH CLUBS IN DUBLINS  
PREMIUM LOCATIONS

ICONIC  
HEALTH CLUBS

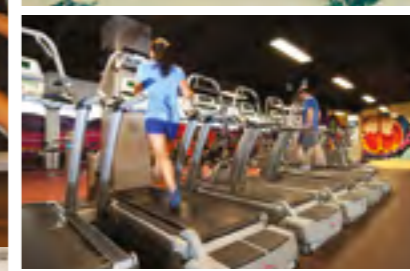
OFFICIAL WELLBEING  
PARTNER TO



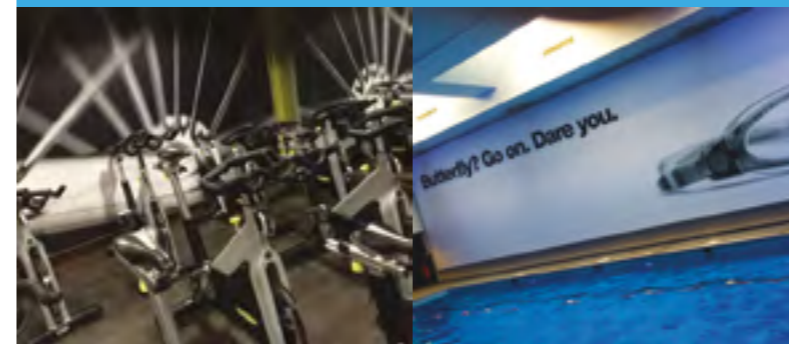
## THE BUSINESS CLASS EXPERIENCE



## FASTER, FITTER, STRONGER



## OUR NEWEST HEALTH CLUB



ICON Health Club 1-4  
Lower Camden Street, Dublin 2.  
Tel: 01 405 3777/8  
[www.iconhealthclub.ie](http://www.iconhealthclub.ie)



The Dartry Health Club  
31 Palmerston Gardens,  
Dartry, Dublin 6.  
Tel: (01) 491 1675  
[www.thedartryhealthclub.ie](http://www.thedartryhealthclub.ie)



1escape health club,  
block G, smithfield market, Dublin 7.  
Tel: 01 4850700/01  
[www.oneescape.ie](http://www.oneescape.ie)

CALL US TODAY FOR A 5 DAY PASS TO YOUR CLUB OF CHOICE.

t&c's apply



# LEGAL EAGLE

Munster bound winger nominated for prestigious Law Award

**DIARMUID KILGALLEN**



## Not many people know that Diarmuid Kilgallen is a published author.

With no rugby references or action shots, few would have recognised that the piece in the Irish Examiner - which addressed the final report of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Assisted Dying - was co-authored by the Munster bound winger.

Its publication, allied to his continued commitment to his law degree in NUIG and wider contributions to the university's acclaimed School of Law, saw Kilgallen nominated for Law Student of the Year at the recent Irish Law Awards.

"It was a nice boost," he says of the acknowledgement. "Thankfully my grades have been decent, but I think the nomination is reflective of the balancing act more than anything else."

In many ways, a dual career has always been part of Kilgallen's bigger picture. Even as a prominent schools' player with Cistercian College Roscrea, he refused to be defined by what happened on the field, involving himself in school life in a variety of ways.

"Leaving Roscrea, rugby was always my number one priority but I never saw college as a Plan B," he states. "I always felt I should have a few strings to my bow."



It's an attitude he retained even as Connacht Rugby started looking in his direction. Inevitably, Kilgallen's head was turned yet he afforded plenty of time to consider his academic trajectory.

Having been exposed to the legal world in Transition Year, Kilgallen was glad to find something that seemed to suit his skillset. It was almost a relief that an outlet for his sharp, analytical mind existed and so from an early age, his sights had also been set on a legal profession.

A more concerted shift in emphasis came about following meetings with Dr Deirdre Lyons and Connacht Rugby staff who explained to Kilgallen and his parents that, with hard work and support, there was an opportunity to marry both his academic and sporting aspirations.

"It definitely helped knowing what I wanted to do" Kilgallen says. "When Deirdre mentioned that she had experience of bringing players through a law degree at NUIG, it made the decision pretty easy for me because I knew it could be managed."

Even as rugby assumed greater importance in his life, the Eadestown man knuckled down in the lecture halls too. While he spread out the final years of his course, he initially threw himself into his curriculum, developing some valuable skills in the process.

"I learned how to work smart from the beginning" he says. "If ever there were marks on offer, I went after them and made sure to keep things ticking over. I didn't allow anything to build up and I learned to be really efficient with my time."

"To be honest, I found that the biggest benefit was in how it helped me to develop a very honest and disciplined mindset. There's no cutting corners in either field."

"Going into college I knew I had a limited amount of time to get my work done so I needed to be switched on. On the other hand, I loved training because it took me away from the library. I felt I was able to give more to each session because I appreciated being there."

"While there's not much of a skills overlap, they complimented each other more than you'd think. One ended up becoming a break from the other. I really enjoyed that switch-up. I was a player one minute, a student the next."

Going into the 2023/24 season and the final year of his BCL, Kilgallen appreciated that it was always going to be a busy one. While his grades were consistently positive, he was disappointed not to feature on the field as much as he would have liked.





Having enjoyed a prolific start, he suffered hamstring and shoulder injuries which saw him sidelined for much of the campaign. The introduction of intensive rehab into his schedule also meant that Kilgallen faced a challenge to ensure his studies remained on track.

In the midst of it all, his contract was running down. However, though unsettling for most, Kilgallen was largely unmoved. There were a few options on the table, and he approached the matter with his customary decisiveness.

“When the possibility of going to Munster arose I began to consider what the new challenge might be like. After plenty of conversations I decided it was best for me to make the move. Thankfully we were able to get an agreement in place with Munster pretty quickly which meant I could also arrange the logistical stuff in good time.

“Everything is sorted now ahead of the move to Limerick so I’m looking forward to getting stuck in. I’ll be like the new kid at school on the first day of term. It will be bit nerve wracking, but nerves are good. It’s exciting.”

Despite the conviction in his choice to move on, Kilgallen recognises the role that Galway has

“**It’s been a busy few years but most importantly, my family have stood by me every step of the way.**”

played in his life since landing out west straight out of school.

“It really feels like a second home to me,” he acknowledges. “A lot of what I know is in Galway. All my mates are there. As much as I knew what I wanted, the reality of leaving was always going to be tough. I was aware of that.

“I’m also leaving NUIG and many of my classmates are moving on too. The School of Law there were so good to me, especially people like Dr Brian Tobin who gave me so much of his time and was often on the sideline to cheer me on too.

“Then Deirdre [Lyons] and everyone in Connacht Rugby... they have been like family over the years. I had an unbelievable time and wouldn’t change it for the world.

“It’s been a busy few years but most importantly, my family have stood by me every step of the way. They’ve been unbelievably supportive of me in everything I do in all facets of life and I am incredibly grateful for them.

“They too know how I like to test myself and grow, and so with their support I feel the time is right to take on the next challenge.”



**A FRESH TAKE ON REFRESHMENT.**

**#NOWYOU CAN**

**GREAT TASTE. ZERO ALCOHOL.**





# FORMATIVE FEEDBACK

Laois footballer championing TYF Schools programme

EOIN LOWRY



**As the school year wound down and the sounds of bustling corridors faded into silence, the machinations of the Tackle Your Feelings campaign cranked in the opposite direction.**

As part of her PhD out of the University of Limerick, which is fully funded by TYF, Anna McHale has been travelling the country as she carries out extensive research into the impact role models have on the mental health and wellbeing of adolescents.

McHale's work has focused on several schools who last year agreed to participate in the research being done on the effectiveness and impact of TYF's schools' programme. Dotted throughout the island of Ireland, these schools and the accompanying research will capture the broadest possible cross-section of the Irish school community.

One such school that McHale and Tackle Your Feelings have been working closely with is St. Mary's CBS in Portlaoise, where Laois inter-county footballer Eoin Lowry has been championing the initiative with his students.

"It had been a challenging year for the local community," Lowry explains as he sets out St. Mary's initial interest in the programme. "Unfortunately, we've experienced difficult times and loss over the past few years"

Lowry's open-mindedness to mental wellbeing saw St. Mary's CBS nominated as a research school, getting first access to the latest instalment of the programme which has seen a range of in-app content upgrades, a brand-new teaching platform and lesson adjustments.

"I was keen to get a programme like Tackle Your Feelings on board because I felt it was something the school could really benefit from, students and teachers alike. I think what some might overlook is that the programme is a two-way street.

"There have always been challenges for young people at school however programmes like Tackle Your Feelings have not always been available, and the discussing emotions or an openness to vulnerability was not where it's at today.

"Programmes such as this has brought about a new era in our school where vulnerability due to different life events is not a taboo and seeking support is championed. The school is not just an education setting, it's a community, a support system.

"To get the most out of people I think those kinds of insights are so important. With a little more knowledge about someone you begin to pick up on cues and understand why a student might be acting a certain way and you can respond



appropriately. As a school we've been through a lot and so we've been keen to develop an awareness on both sides of the desk."

Still a teenager when first called upon by Laois, Lowry was thrust into an adult world far sooner than he might otherwise have expected. Thankfully he has become adept at dealing with much of the expectation regularly placed on his shoulders at both club and county level, while the ability to cope under pressure has also found its way to the top of the classroom. However, it wasn't always so.

"I actually learned a lot for myself from the programme," he admits. "I've always had an interest in mental wellbeing but by leading the lads through TYF I also picked up some practical tips that make me look back and wonder if I could have pushed on to another level if I had been using them from a young age.

"I carried a lot as a young lad and didn't really tell anyone about it. It wasn't really the done thing back then. I didn't make a link at the time but now I see the impact it had on my exams and my performances on the pitch too.

"If I had given my worries an outlet, perhaps I could have given a better account of myself but instead, I found myself at a bit of a crossroads in my life's journey a little longer than others maybe. I diverted for a while before I found that confidence again to travel the road of teaching."

**“I’ve always had an interest in mental wellbeing but by leading the lads through TYF I also picked up some practical tips**



While Lowry ploughed on for Laois, he decided to back away from teaching for a few years. He returned to carpentry where he could try build confidence again and to figure everything out in the process. Thanks to the help of those closest to him, he slowly regained his confidence and has been back in full-time teaching since 2021.

“I’d never really known the value of talking to people during my schooldays,” Lowry admits. “Because of the challenges life threw at me, I began to do a bit of my own research into mental health during the lockdown and gradually my understanding began to improve.”

“When people talk about mental health, they automatically think of therapy or counselling sessions, but TYF shows you that that there is so much more you can do to stay on top of things. You can be proactive, get ahead and not let negative thoughts build any momentum.”

On a practical level, Lowry appreciated the easy-to-follow lesson plans, the simple tips, the familiar faces on video and group exercises. He tells us that recently the class were competing for the best sleep scores on their fitness watches and seeing who was most recovered ahead of an important game.

Above all though, Lowry appreciates how Tackle Your Feelings has opened the door for both teacher and student to share a little more about themselves.

“Obviously there is a rugby focus and while there were some lads who struggled to engage because they wouldn’t be the sporty type, for the most part I think everyone took something from the programme.”

“With a bit of preparation, I was able to relate the topics to their own lives: how they deal with exam pressures, how they manage relationships, how they can work on their self-confidence. There’s plenty of knowledge in there for them to digest and they’d note all the buzzwords.”



“Some topics generated greater interest and so I’d use it as an opportunity to open out the conversation. It could be a bit mentally draining dragging some of my own experiences back up, but I think the class responded to my honesty and we could also access a few interesting people who had their own stories to add.”

“For example, our TY co-ordinator is Paul Cahillane who is a former Celtic footballer. He talked about his time in Glasgow, moving away from Ireland at a young age and then having to return home when he was released because of a few bad injuries.”

“I suppose we are lucky in St. Mary’s CBS how we have staff who have experienced success and difficulties in their sporting careers, while some teachers may find it difficult to admit or see themselves as role models, their challenges and experiences have given our students an insight into life’s ups and downs.”

While others would disagree, owing to Laois’ mixed fortunes in recent years Lowry is hesitant to suggest he is a person of influence in the area. However, given his long service to the county he recognises that he has nevertheless earned the respect of the Laois GAA community.

“I’d see it a little in the first years when they come into the school but, you know yourself, after a while it becomes the norm to see Mr. Lowry at the top of the classroom. At the weekends though I become ‘Lowry’, the Laois forward again and you can guarantee my performance will be analysed on the Monday morning. They don’t hold back... I get a blow-by-blow account of my performance!”

“Whether or not I’m seen as a role model I can’t say but regardless I try to do everything I can to support and give words of encouragement to the students. I know the impact a word of encouragement can have on anyone. It all comes down to setting a good example but as with anything, some stuff is out of your control.”

“As we finished up the course and set the lads free for summer, I encouraged them to keep in contact with each other. If they’re going to the swimming pool, I asked them to invite some of the other lads along. If there are lads who aren’t that sporty, get them where they are going to be, on Snapchat or whatever. Just make sure to check in.”

“I do feel the TYF programme drives that message of the importance of different communities and support networks and the lads have acknowledged this on reflection of the programme. They’re steps we should be taking anyway but thanks to TYF the students now understand how important those little steps can be.”

“I’m confident they’ll look out for each other this summer and if it makes a difference to one person, well that’s important for our school community.”

## TACKLE YOUR FEELINGS SCHOOLS

### TYF SCHOOLS: EXPLORING PERSPECTIVES ON UTILISING A WEB AND SMARTPHONE-BASED MENTAL WELLBEING INTERVENTION IN IRISH SECOND-LEVEL SCHOOLS

Ms. Anna McHale, Prof. Mark Campbell, & Dr. Jennifer McMahon

## PRELIMINARY QUALITATIVE RESULTS

### 1. ADOPTION

*“Well prior to this I think, I think it’s a bit stupid that a school wouldn’t have something like this... every school needs it. And I just think especially when people are going into their teens, everyone kind of needs that support, knowing that they have someone to talk to.”*

### 2. IMPLEMENTATION (FIDELITY)

#### DOSAGE

*“If there was just kind of a few more chapters or something, we could do more stuff than we could do it more than once a week”*

#### QUALITY OF DELIVERY

*“If the teacher is kind of like not really doing it that well. They’re just kind of gonna be like that if you don’t kind of like you care. But if the teachers really good and they’re like putting loads of energy into it then you would get involved more so, it kind of helps.”*

### 3. ACCEPTABILITY OF CONTENT

*“In an all boys school, you might get judged for letting your emotions out like called names or something like how weak or something. But like with that, like just helps you shows like there’s nothing wrong with letting your emotions out and all. So it’s just interesting to see like that it is OK to let your emotions out about things that you are going through.”*

### 4. ACCEPTABILITY OF STRUCTURE

*“I just like the whole aspect of it and the layout of the programme and really enjoyed doing it.”*

*“If there was more kind of like more to it, If there was more kind of like to it, if there was just kind of a few more*

*chapters or something, we could do more stuff than we could do it more than once a week. I think it’s needed because I know obviously it would be hard to like get rid of class like CSPE and all. But I’d much prefer doing two classes talking about my mental health a week, then do CSPE”*

### 5. IMPACT ON STUDENTS

#### UNDERSTANDING OF WELLBEING

*“I think it’s changed our whole perspective on mental health...if you try speaking about your mental health in second year, the boys would just kind of take the mick out of you like ah gway, sure you’re only 14, like cop on. But like now if I came up to really anyone in the year, I think and I said ah here I’m not feeling well, I feel like they kind of know what way to take it in and kind of you know talk to me about it.”*

#### EMOTIONAL REGULATION

*“I just said found it was something different and I learned how to express your emotions and the way to deal with problems and it was engaging.”*

#### GRATITUDE

*“It helped with gratitude, like now cause with the app you had to write down like three things you’re grateful for and like it helped you realise you should be grateful for stuff.”*

#### COPING THROUGH SOCIAL SUPPORT

*“Helps you understand others well-being others well beings like say you might be able to tell if someone’s feeling down or if they need any need someone to talk to, but they might be too afraid to let it out.”*

*“It can also like it shows like continuously lets you know that like you’re not alone.”*



# TACKLE YOUR FEELINGS

## LAUNCH OF REVISED SCHOOLS APP

After months of research and development, Tackle Your Feelings has launched an updated TYF Schools App. Made with with new digital features, the updated app supported by greater accessibility and updates to content and makes the programme easier for teachers.

To date, thousands of students have already participated in the curriculum which was first launched by teacher Eimear Considine in 2020. Through the app, secondary school teachers are equipped with the tools and resources to guide their students through a life skills development programme which enables students to build healthy habits and personal coping mechanisms underpinned by positive sport psychology principles.

In a recent pilot study conducted in association with the University of Limerick, it was found that the comprehensive lesson plans and accessible resources covering a range of emotions helped normalise conversations around mental wellbeing. Furthermore, teachers also felt the presence of influential rugby players throughout the app was a significant feature.



*"It's an incredible resource for teachers to deliver useful and valuable support for young people at what can be an overwhelming and challenging time in their lives. It is fantastic to see more and more young people equip themselves with the tools to best manage their mental wellbeing in a positive way."*

**Ryan Baird** - Strategic Advisor, Tackle Your Feelings



*"I have used Tackle Your Feelings' resources extensively throughout my rugby career. My mental strength comes from the incredible people around me and through learning the valuable skills of maintaining a healthy relationship with the management of my own mental health."*

**Deirbhile Nic a Bháird** - PhD Student, Affective Communication in Online Social Spaces (TUD)

## TYF EXPERT ADVISORY PANEL

The Tackle Your Feelings Expert Advisory Panel has been established to further the progress of the TYF Schools campaign.

Meeting on a quarterly basis, the panel comprises a number of experts primarily in the fields of education, psychology and wellbeing. The panel also features a number of Rugby Players Ireland's members including Ryan Baird (TYF Strategic Advisor), Fiona Coghlan (teacher), Linda Djougang (TYF Ambassador) and Alan Quinlan (Mental Health Advocate).



# TACKLE YOUR FEELINGS

## JOIN OUR COMMUNITY

DOWNLOAD THE FREE APP



VISIT OUR WEBSITE

TACKLEYOURFEELINGS.COM

A MENTAL WELLBEING CAMPAIGN  
BROUGHT TO YOU BY RUGBY PLAYERS  
IRELAND IN PARTNERSHIP WITH ZURICH





# MORE THAN A PLAYER

In a new series in conjunction with BKT URC, we take you off the pitch and into the personal lives of some of the league's best players.

## CALVIN NASH

It's been quite the 12 months for Munster winger Calvin Nash.

The 26-year-old became a key member of Munster's starting line-up last season as they conquered the United Rugby Championship. Nash scored the crucial try as the southern Irish province defeated the DHL Stormers in the Grand Final in one of the most famous of unlikely runs.

Fast forward to 2024 and Nash's form for Munster saw him called up for the 2024 Six Nations. Thrust straight into the starting line-up for the opening round against France, Nash once again found himself getting on the scoresheet. He went on to claim a Six Nations winner's medal.

But that's on the pitch. Off the pitch, Calvin is certainly more than a player.

Outside of rugby the Limerick native keeps himself busy and is currently studying a Strength & Conditioning course at Setanta College.

*"I went to Marcus [Horan] who works with Rugby Players Ireland and I was like, 'man I need to get something outside of rugby,' because I felt like I needed to have a plan." Nash tells us.*

*"I'm mad into strength & conditioning and the gym side of things so Marcus put me in touch with Setanta College and they've been unbelievable in aiding me.*

*"Sometimes I'd get my timings wrong, say I'm due an assignment tomorrow and I could have been away for two weeks with Munster in South Africa but the lads in Setanta have been class - they'd give me another week if needed."*

So playing for Munster, playing for Ireland, all while studying in college – Nash has plenty on his plate but he still makes time for the most important hobby of all...

*"The lads will slag me now if they hear this but I'm a big fan of getting out with my dog," Nash says with a smile.*

*"I feel like it's good for the head to just get out and get away from phones and all that, and just get out with him and act the eejit!"*

*"I went through a phase last year of 'jeez, I need another hobby besides walking my dog!'"*

Nothing wrong with getting out with the dog, Calvin!

## LUKE MARSHALL

Ulster's Luke Marshall has had plenty of trials and tribulations throughout his storied career which comes to an end this summer.

He spent 10 months on the sidelines after injuring his anterior cruciate ligament in May 2018 before spending a further 16 months out of action following a second knee injury in March of 2022.

He has been capped 11 times by Ireland and no doubt would have added to those had he not spent so long out injured but that hasn't stopped him from racking up almost 200 appearances Ulster Rugby in the BKT URC.

Marshall has also been working hard off the pitch studying for his QFA qualifications, which are a certificate in financial advice.

*"There are three exams for the level fours, so I've done two of them and I'm trying to pick when to finish the third one, so I'd have a level four qualification then for financial advice," Marshall tells us.*

*"I started, jeezers now, about four years ago. It took me a while!"*

*"I tried it when I first came out of school and failed miserably and dropped out! I was in the Ulster academy and struggling to balance them both.*

*"I spoke to my Dad and he said 'there was no point' in doing both of them half-a\*\*ed. You might as well focus on one, you've limited time to give rugby a crack. You can study whenever you want to."*

While the lay-offs have been a struggle over the years, having to endure lengthy spells on the sidelines also gave him the nudge he needed to start getting back to the books again.

Above all though, the long road to recovery reminded him just how important the family unit is. He even got married while recovering from the first injury and recounts a funny tale, showing he can see the lighter side of it now that it's all in the past, now.

*"My family has been really good to me," Marshall says.*

*"I got the surgery three weeks before I got married in 2018. I should have been on crutches for my wedding day but I managed to get off them."*

*"I actually hurt my knee while I was on the dancefloor! I wasn't supposed to dance at all but the band put Riverdance on!"*

*"I didn't hurt it badly but I shouldn't have been on the dancefloor!"*

The 33-year-old has also been doing his bit to bring the Ulster lads together for some charity work with Rugby Players Ireland and he's been grateful for the opportunity to help out where he can.

*"Darren Cave used to lead the community engagement side of things and once he retired he asked if would I take it on," Marshall adds.*

*"I organised the players but a lot of the heavy lifting would have been done by Pamela Gilpin and Christina Mahon."*

*"They were brilliant. They were the ones organising whether it was going into the Simon Community or speaking to homeless people. I remember we went in and built furniture one day."*

*"We would have organised Christmas presents too for underprivileged families. I really enjoyed it."*

*"I think stuff like that, especially when you're playing professional rugby, in the grand scheme of things rugby is a cushy career. You're getting well paid to do your hobby and run around like an eejit."*

*"When you go in and see people that are properly suffering, it really gives you some perspective on life and makes you realise how lucky you are."*





# ELITE BALANCE

Irish International on how she gets stuff done

EIMEAR CORRI



**Medical practitioners are a brave breed: they need to be – even though they act as the bumpers for someone’s health and wellbeing, it doesn’t always mean that the ten pins ahead will be knocked down. Their true talent lies in adapting to the unforeseen.**

While we might overly-dramatise the game of rugby, its players are of a similarly brave disposition. They all know how to get from A to B, but the ones who stand out are those who rise above the obstacles in their path.

Trainee doctor Eimear Corri is a good example. In her own telling, she dulls her story as if mere happenstance saw her earn her first Irish cap last year. She adopts the same humble tone when speaking of her imminent internship at a leading Irish hospital.

Of course, both pursuits may indeed be simply form part of Eimear’s picture but to most, it’s a remarkable balance of elite disciplines over many years of dedication.

It has stepped up a few gears in recent months too. Last September Corri’s longstanding ambition to play for Ireland was realised when she was called upon by Scott Bemand for WXV3. She had been impressing for several months as an athletic forward for both for Blackrock College and Leinster Rugby.

**“With the support of RCSI, my coaches and Aoife, it felt like we were all on a little journey together.”**

Yet the timing was far from ideal. She was already entrenched in her final year of medicine at the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI), juggling demanding placements and continuous assessments which would shape her trajectory in a competitive healthcare sphere.

“When I got the call-up for WXV3 I was already on placement and working towards my finals, so it wasn’t really a case of whether I commit to one or the other – that decision was already made,” Corri explains.

“I had never really been in the equation to remove myself from it, so there was never a call to say I wasn’t up for selection or anything,” she continues. “I was just enjoying myself and put my hand up through my performances even though I knew that if the call ever were to come, there’d be a fair bit of work involved.”

Balancing the demands of her studies with the expectations of an elite international athlete required careful communication and planning. It was a path fraught with challenges and so Corri came to rely on people like Aoife Lane (Player Development Manager for the Women’s XV’s) to ensure that she remained on track.

“With the support of RCSI, my coaches and Aoife, it felt like we were all on a little journey together. It was important that everyone was on the same page, especially me. There were times when I had to understand that if they felt something couldn’t be done, I had to accept it.

“Yet as difficult as I knew it was going to be, playing for Ireland wasn’t something I was prepared to turn down.”





Growing up in Portlaoise, Corri always harboured dreams of playing for Ireland and so while her commitments were often taxing, she kept the potential trade-off in her sights.

"I think the toughest thing was actually being on my feet all day and then trying to be as energetic as possible at training. My placement schedule didn't really allow for what was recommended in terms of rest, recovery, and nutrition.

"As a student doctor, I also had to be mentally switched on throughout the day. You're effectively learning on the job and while you don't have the same hands-on responsibilities, you can't just go 'screw this, I'm off to lunch!'

"It wasn't easy, but the things you once could only dream about never are."

Integrated into the provincial system at a young age as a flying winger, by 18 she had already been part of a successful interprovincial campaign with Leinster prompting her to recalibrate and set her sights on the next step: a senior Irish cap.

However, her early progress was soon halted by a series of severe injuries.

"I fractured my ankle in 2017 and did the other one on my comeback. All in, I was sidelined for about three seasons," she recalls. "I had rehabbed with a huge goal in mind, but the reality was that I was several rungs down the ladder. I noticed I didn't have the same agility and the fast feet I relied on had gone missing.

"Above all it was a massive mental adjustment and there were times when it might have been easier to say: 'you know what, I think I'll leave it.' I don't think anybody would have batted much of an eyelid. Yet I think it all made me realise how much I wanted to play for Ireland and thankfully, I have a huge appetite to learn."

Having failed to make the Leinster squad and struggled to establish herself in Blackrock's first XV, Eimear spoke openly with her coaches about the difficulties she was experiencing and sought assurances that this wasn't the beginning of the end. In return she promised to work diligently at whatever they suggested. As it happened, there was an opening in their pack.



"In hindsight I do wonder if they suggested it just because I was tall but I made the move to the second row without much fuss!" she says. "It was definitely a different kind of enjoyment. I had so much to learn: the technicalities of the position, all the set-piece information and figuring out how to work in a pod rather than being at the end of a move!"

Ultimately, Eimear's perseverance paid off. Her form saw her rise through the ranks again and she made her Irish debut from the bench against Kazakhstan in Dubai last October. She followed it with a start in the crunch WXV3 clash with Colombia and was part of the squad for their recent Six Nations campaign.

"That first cap will remain with me forever. My parents travelled over to Dubai from Portlaoise. The whole thing was an unbelievable experience. It was such an enjoyable environment and I loved having the extra time in the day to build real connections with the other players. It was also a massive opportunity to learn how elite players prepare, how they approach their day and how they analyse the opposition.

"Thankfully I took a common-sense approach too because it would have been easy to roll with everything and go for coffees with the girls, but it was also my final year so there was no let up from an academic point of view."

With her next step in her medical journey determined by her national ranking, Eimear also found herself in the midst of a competitive academic environment. The potential to burn out was vast, yet she relied on others to ensure she remained on track, as she will do into the future.

"Obviously it's a massive year from a medicine point of view but at the back of my mind I'm very aware that there is a Rugby World Cup on the horizon. Once I settle into my internship I'll sit down with Aoife [Lane] again and we'll figure out what meshes with the rugby calendar.

"Aoife has been amazing. She's one of the first people I'll call about all of this stuff. As players we can be totally immersed in our rugby and it can often blur the picture but Aoife is able to step in a put her pragmatic stamp on things.

"She's also the kind of person to get stuff done. I'm obviously quite busy but there are times that I put awkward tasks on the long finger too, yet nothing is ever an issue and she'll always sort me out. I still work off an excel sheet she created for me – I think I shared it with half of the squad!

"And yet I also appreciate that she is her own person too, and I enjoy her company and how I can bounce things off her. God, if I told you the number of times I've popped my head around the door in the HPC to see if she was there...!

"That's the importance of Rugby Players Ireland for me. They are the link between it all."



## 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.**



# CHANGING THINGS UP

Sportskn founder Jarrad Butler on the transitions in his career

JARRAD BUTLER



**As his time in Connacht comes to an end, Jarrad Butler has found himself in the habit of trying to change things up. It's nothing new to him given how the swirling currents of fate swept him onto Galway's rugged coastline in the first place.**

When Butler and his family landed on Australia's Gold Coast from Paraparaumu in New Zealand at 13, he quickly realised that it was an arbitrary location for his rugby aspirations.

As a popular tourist destination, he found that surfing and golf were the main pursuits of choice in the area. Given its sporadic history with professional club sport, the region failed to offer the pathways Butler's talents called for.

However, his ambitions remained undimmed. His rugby coach recognised that Butler's abilities deserved more and soon the youngster was traipsing along to trials in various rugby outposts. Considerable mileage was clocked up, but Butler found his way to a scholarship at Southport School, a hallowed ground for budding rugby players.

"If you think about it, I wouldn't be in Galway today if it wasn't for that scholarship," he acknowledges, thanking the stars for their alignment.

Of course, stints with the Reds and Brumbies doubtlessly helped. Yet Connacht Rugby was where he was meant to be and when the call came it beckoned like a siren song.

"I remember getting the call," he muses, evoking memories of the excitement and trepidation he felt. "The different moves throughout my life meant that I've always been open to different experiences, and I just jumped at the opportunity even though I couldn't have told you much about Galway. It was a real shot in the dark."

As he arrived to an unfamiliar landscape often hidden by a curtain of rain, Butler questioned his motives. Yet his initial apprehension soon melted away in the face of the Galway's enigmatic charm.

"That first day I was like, 'what have I got myself into?' But man, it was interesting. Here I was on the other side of the bloody world and I couldn't be further from home.

"Looking back, I wouldn't have had it any other way. If you told me I'd still be here seven years later, still loving Galway, I wouldn't have believed you. It's been brilliant. I've fallen in love with the place."

Sadly, Butler's seven-year stint with Connacht Rugby comes to an end this summer. An instant hit, he was named the province's player of the year in his debut campaign and would go on to captain the side following John Muldoon's retirement.



Over the course of almost 130 caps, JB cast a considerable influence on the Sportsground.

While his on-field legacy is assured, Butler has also left an indelible impact on the Galway community. Whether coaching at Galwegians, serving coffees in Salthill or engaging in any number of charitable initiatives in the area, Butler always makes a lasting impression.

Yet there is also another side to 'JB'. Over recent months his entrepreneurial spirit has found expression in Sportskn, a venture born from his own experiences navigating the rigors of athletic life. His former teammate Niyi Adeolokun is also involved.

"Training has been part and parcel of my life and through that I've seen the effect the cold, the heat and sweat can have on the skin. For most of my career I've struggled to find something that was designed for active people," he explains, recounting his quest for skincare solutions tailored to the demands of athletes.

"For the past three or four years I've spoken to a range of dermatologists and skincare professionals to learn more and to identify natural ingredients for our products that help to rehydrate and rejuvenate the skin, reduce redness and prevent breakouts. 4G pitches are also quite abrasive so we have recovery gels to deal with those micro-cuts you pick up.

"It's been a long process but it's also been fun going out to meet people from different worlds. It's also been good to have a bit of a purpose on my day off, even if it's to send a few emails and things like that."

Butler's journey into entrepreneurship doesn't stop there. Together with Steve Crosbie, he has also ventured into the world of wellbeing with Fad Saoil Saunas, a testament to their shared vision and boundless ambition.



"I think it's good to keep in contact with your teammates and manage that network and it's something I plan to do as I move on. A group of us got together for Freezbruary a few years ago and as we raced across the road to the sauna in the Salthill Hotel, I remember chatting to Steve about how handy it'd be if there was one by the ocean.

"I didn't think much more of it until Steve came back three months later and said, 'man, let's do it!' In fairness, he had been plugging away at a business plan and seeing his energy and passion, it was hard not to get on board with the guy. He's the perfect person to lead Fad Saoil.

"It's been cool to see the kind of progress a little idea can make."

It can be said that Butler has been putting his own building blocks in place as he prepares for life after rugby. While Sportskn has been his guiding star, little by little he has been sampling a range of experiences in a bid to be as ready as he can be.

"As you get to the latter stages of your career, you know that there is an end point coming. That transition can be intimidating and so I've been working towards filling the empty space that rugby will leave. For me, a lot of it comes down to confidence and being able to go into rooms to meet with people.

"At Connacht we've had Deirdre Lyons over the years. She's probably the hardest working woman in the building. It's unbelievable the lengths she goes to to help anyone that might be looking to do something.

"Whether it's study, work experience or trying to start a business like me. She's been outstanding. It's brilliant to have that support mechanism."



Wherever his future may lie, it's clear that Butler will always retain an affinity with Galway. This was further entrenched in a season that saw Galwegians promoted this season with Butler helping to pull strings from the sidelines.

"I enjoyed the break from the intensity of the professional stuff and being able to look at the game from a different point of view. Instead of trying to take everything in when you're also trying to get stuck in, you get to take a step back.

"Above all though you feel like you're giving back to a community that has given you so much. It all starts at grassroots and at the local clubs. You start to find people who share the same interests and passions as you do. You pick up the bug. It all feeds through the game. Right to the very top. Ireland are probably the best at it.

"I remember my mum taking me to rugby when I first started playing as a 9-year-old back in New Zealand. I don't remember missing a session or a game. I must have ruined so many of her weekends just so I could do my thing.

"I do remember that I always left my mouthguard at home though. I must have bought 20 in one season. Mum was always there to sort me out even when it might have been easier not to. She was putting me on a path.

"It was step one of a journey I'm so grateful for."



# DRUIDS GLEN


## HOTEL & GOLF RESORT

### WHERE NATURE MEETS LUXURY


**Welcome to our five-star hideaway and submerge yourself in the tranquillity of Druids Glen Hotel & Golf Resort. Nestled in 360 acres between the Wicklow Mountains and the Irish Sea, yet only 30 minutes from Dublin city centre.**

**The Resort offers 145 spacious guestrooms and suites, eight conference and event spaces, dining options to include Hugo's Restaurant, the Garden Rooms and Bar, along with a Spa, Health Club and two championship golf courses, Druids Glen and Druids Heath**

**We are delighted to announce the official reopening of Woodstock House, a wonderful 1700's period house steeped in history. The house boasts a rich legacy, and offers beautifully curated guestrooms, along with a range of dining spaces, with private dining for up to 100 guests, and panoramic views over Druids Glen Golf Course and the Irish Sea.**

  
A NEVILLE HOTEL

**Druids Glen Hotel & Golf Resort, Newtownmountkennedy, Co Wicklow. A63 DW08**  
T: +353 1 287 0800 | E: reservations@druidsglenresort.com | W: www.druidsglenresort.com





# LOOKING TO THE PAST

As a new role beckons, Deirdre reflects on her time as Connacht Rugby PDM

DR DEIRDRE LYONS



When I started with Rugby Players Ireland (then IRUPA) in 2013, personal development outside of rugby was very much seen as an 'optional' support. Fast forward 10 years and everyone in the high-performance system at Connacht Rugby values how important it is to see the player as a person first, and that optimising a players' time in the game can have benefits - on and off the pitch.

Two key moments stick out for me. One was in 2018 when Willie Ruane, as Connacht Rugby CEO, approached me to ask how the province could better support players in this space. Following conversations between the IRFU, Rugby Players Ireland and Connacht Rugby, we trialled the integration of the Rugby Players Ireland Player Development Manager into the Connacht senior and Academy professional teams.

The second moment that sticks out was when Andy Friend took over as Head Coach. Before he started, Andy rang me to introduce himself and to outline his philosophy for working with players and staff. He was a big believer in personal development and the importance of creating well-rounded players. The proposed integration that Willie had previously suggested therefore became pretty seamless and a gamechanger in how I work.

On a practical level, this meant I was involved in management and staff meetings and had an accessible office onsite, but more importantly I felt supported by having the players' personal development seen as an important pillar of the high-performance programme. Rather than chasing everyone for their time, I was now able to walk out onto the pitch to observe training and chat to the injured players on a casual basis. I was able to attend team meetings, align with the team's focus for the week and interact with all the other coaches and staff which made for the creation of organic relationships, something I was grateful for when Eric Elwood and Pete Wikins stepped up. Like Nigel and Andy before them, Eric and Pete also view a player's development outside of rugby as part of their individual performance plan. I think this is reflective of the holistic approach now being taken by Irish coaches.

Over the years there have been lots of little wins but it's not until much later on that you learn of the impact you have had on players' lives. The Player Development Programme (PDP) is very much a person-to-person support. While we use



technology and online resources, it is being present in the players' lives that sets us apart. Backed by Omar Hassenein and Simon Keogh, the PDP has grown considerably since I joined Rugby Players Ireland in 2013. Today we have seven PDMs working with every province and senior national sides.

When I started, I didn't know what to expect with IRUPA. Logistically, I was covering two teams (Munster and Connacht) over three bases (Cork, Limerick and Galway). Furthermore, during my 15 years at the Sport Ireland Institute I had worked predominantly with amateur athletes so I found that the challenges rugby players faced were often very different. Trying to influence professional players to look towards life after rugby was very difficult at first, but over time we built a sound philosophy to our programme that was built around three main areas:

1. **Whole person** – players are people first
2. **Whole career** – rugby is part of, and contributes to, a life career
3. **Whole environment** – the network of factors, influences, and support systems that surround a player as they move through different phases of their career

This approach helped me to meet players where they were at in their stage of development, understand the context that they operate in, and view their time in rugby as a phase of their development that they can optimise both now, and in the future.

Initially my aim was to build relationships and trust with all stakeholders. Later, as I began to lead the programme, I also had to show how it added value not only to players, but to the Irish rugby system as a whole. We developed a database to track players' development and this enabled us to put data behind what we do. Players and staff are used to tracking rugby development, so why should their personal development be any different?

One of my first meetings in Connacht Rugby was with Eoin Griffin, the IRUPA player rep at the time. Throughout all of my years, working closely with the player reps Eoin Griffin, Eoin McKeon, Eoghan Masterson, Tom Daly; RPI Executive Board members Ronan Loughney, Eoin McKeon, Jack Carty and Dave Heffernan; and the Academy reps Oisín Michel, Eoin de Buitlear, Sean Masterson and Paul Boyle has been crucial for understanding what is needed on the ground by the players. Enjoying positive relationships with Tim Allnutt (Head of Rugby Operations), and with Academy Managers Nigel Carolan and Eric Elwood also helped me massively in managing the timing of meetings and interventions with players.



Over the years some parts of the role have changed massively but the same old chestnuts appear every year. At the start of every season the mood in the squad is always very positive and welcoming. It is like the slate is wiped clean and 'we go again'. Getting to know new players can be challenging but it is a part of the job that I really love. I also ensure to check in with the players who have recently left the club. For some it might be their first pre-season in over a decade that they are not part of and that can be a major adjustment.

Thankfully, there is quite an impressive culture within rugby in Ireland of combining rugby with some form of education. These habits are established in the Academy and then build through the senior ranks. The transition into the professional set-up can be stressful, particularly if players are living away from home from the first time. With study on top of their rugby commitments, it is a lot to ask of a young person. Helping players to navigate that stressful period, while working with colleges to provide increased levels of flexibility, is very time consuming as much of the support is individualised. I am very lucky in Connacht to have built up some great relationships with academics in the University of Galway and the Atlantic Technological University, who are very supportive of players in their ambition to play rugby at the highest level.

There will be many stresses and anxieties throughout a rugby player's career. In my time with Rugby Players Ireland, the awareness of mental health challenges has changed massively. When I started, IRUPA had a 24-hour helpline that was rarely used whereas now, thanks to the efforts of Dr Ella McCabe, Mark Smyth and Aoife Lane we have a well-established Mental Wellbeing service which

has recently been extended to past players and partners of current players. We also run mandatory mental wellbeing workshops every year in clubs, while the Tackle your Feelings campaign has given players a language to speak about their emotions openly. There is still some work to be done in this area, and education and awareness needs to be delivered regularly, but the difference the service has made to some players lives is immeasurable.

While there have been many improvements to the PDP, it can also be a challenging space. Being an independent support in a club can be difficult. The PDM role is very much person and player focused, meaning that some issues that players share with you, may not be liked by the club. As confidentiality and trust is a cornerstone of my work, these values help guide my practice. I have been fortunate to work alongside Aidan O'Flynn, a sports psychotherapist who works with the Academy, and together we can bounce new ideas and old frustrations off each other, as well as support each other with difficult or complex cases (with the player's permission of course!).



Above all, the biggest challenge is that you are working with players who absolutely love what they do, and during the season are so focused on their rugby, that development outside of the game can get pushed to the side. It's completely understandable, so knowing when to push players, and when to lay off them, is really important. It took me years (and a lot of wasted energy) to be comfortable with the fact that some players simply do not wish to engage. Ultimately, I had to realise that a player's personal development is their own responsibility.

I am fortunate to do some consultancy work with the International Rugby Players, so I get to meet Lead PDMs from other rugby nations, and there are some great examples of best practice that I believe would be great to emulate here in Ireland. Learning from best practice all over the world, and not just in rugby, will allow the programme here in Ireland to grow and constantly evolve to meet players' needs. An exposure to international practices also means I can confidently say that we are world leaders in the Player Development space. My vision is for each PDM to be integrated with their teams and clubs, so that the Player Development Programme is seen by all those who work in professional rugby as integral to a player's overall development. I'd also like to have two PDMs based at each club. One working with the current senior players, and one working with the younger Academy and NTS (national talent squad players) and transitioning/retiring players. Not only will players receive more care, but PDMs will also be able to support each other.

It has been a privilege to work with so many players and staff over my 11 years at Connacht Rugby. Making a difference in a person's life, to their overall development and wellbeing, is really worthwhile. Being part of their journey to achieve their goals, both rugby and otherwise, is also rewarding. Working with a variety of players at different levels and from different cultures, that change year on year, has made sure there is plenty of variety coming through my door.

I'm now looking forward to the opportunity to oversee the strategy development of the new past player support programme at Rugby Players Ireland. I was involved in the establishment of the Global Rugby Players Foundation from its inception back in 2021. Listening to the greats of the game like Dan Carter, Jonny Wilkinson. Conrad Smith and Rachael Burford talk about what they wanted to create for all elite and professional rugby players was

really inspiring. To see the GRPF finally launched at the end of May was fantastic, and to be one of the first countries to receive funding to pilot a past player programme is a real testament to the team at Rugby Players Ireland and our vision for the future.

Recently RPI were also the first organisation to launch World Rugby's Brain Health Service for its past players, and together, these two offerings will transform how we support our past players here in Ireland. We recently conducted an independent review of the Player Development Programme, and how we care for our current players is up there with one of the best support programmes in the world. My ambition for the future is to ensure that our support of past players too, is seen as world-leading, and one that other sports will want to emulate.

Personally, I have developed massively at my time in rugby. I have completed my PhD and gained further qualifications in Psychology, Career Coaching and Mentoring. I work as a consultant with International Rugby Players and sit on the Steering Group of the World Players Personal Development Committee. I have built connections all over the world with and am lucky enough to have travelled extensively through numerous CPD opportunities. This would not have been possible without the support of the team at Rugby Players Ireland. We have a really great team of dedicated, ambitious, like-minded individuals, so working alongside them always motivates me to want to achieve more in this space, and truly make Ireland the best place in the world to play rugby.



# GLOBAL RUGBY PLAYERS FOUNDATION

Current and former rugby players from around the world have come together to launch a new charity, the Global Rugby Players Foundation (GRPF). The new independent organisation has been established by the likes of Dan Carter, Jonny Wilkinson, Rachael Burford and Siya Kolisi, while it is also supported by both World Rugby and International Rugby Players. Meanwhile, former Wallabies captain George Gregan will Chair the new charity board of trustees.

The GRPF has been established to empower rugby players who contributed to the success of the game to have a healthy and fulfilling life when they step away from the sport. It will use local solutions to global problems to support players regardless of

their location, while it will also provide a holistic programme of support which wraps around all aspects of former players' lives.

Support will be delivered across five main pillars:

- **On-the ground funding** – This will be grant funding through Players' Associations or trusted partners, with programmes lasting at least a year, tailored for regional differences.
- **GRPF central delivered programmes** – Including providing access to health and wellbeing programmes, health research including women's health, and proactive mental health programmes.
- **Career and business coaching** – That will be delivered individually and in groups, to support players in defining their future lives beyond the game.
- **Community support** – Including the development of a community app to stay connected with other Foundation members.
- **Partnership programmes** – Where the Foundation will work with organisations, sponsors and funders to provide opportunities for former players.

From June 2024, four pilot programmes will be delivered in South Africa, the Pacific Islands, New Zealand and in Ireland through its players' association, Rugby Players Ireland. The GRPF's central delivery of support will start in the Autumn with further funding rounds in the winter of 2024.



“

“Some players move onto new lives after rugby very successfully. But what a lot of people don't realise is that a lot of players face many challenges when they step away from playing the game. Rugby has a responsibility to these players and the Global Rugby Players Foundation seeks to reframe the concept of life after rugby by looking at it as a positive challenge and an opportunity to forge something new and exciting, 'Beyond the Game.'”

**Sara Heath**  
CEO, Global Rugby Players Foundation

“

“The launch of the Foundation is a milestone in how we support the welfare of elite and professional rugby players around the world. Over recent years, former players have highlighted the need for further supports as they finish their playing careers. Some of the most common challenges include a loss of identity and changes to a person's sense of purpose and direction. Players can feel lost, and with that comes various challenges. The GRPF will help tackle these issues that arise, beyond the game.”

**Omar Hassanein**  
CEO, International Rugby Players



# RETIREMENTS

“

I'll miss the big days in red and green but not as much as the daily pursuit and shared team goal of reaching our potential. I'm not exactly sure what is next but I'm very excited to take all the learnings from the last 14 years into the next chapter.

**ANDREW CONWAY**

“

I'm sad to be ending things this way but, at the same time, I've loved my time at Ulster Rugby and in Belfast over the last seven years.

**ANGUS CURTIS**



“

I couldn't have done any of it without the unwavering support of my family. Thank you all so much for the support through the good days and the bad. It wouldn't have been possible without you all in my corner.

**RHYS RUDDOCK**

“

Reflecting on it all, they were the best 10 years of my life and I'd do it all again in a heartbeat. I'd like to thank every player I met along the way. I'm excited now for the next chapter and the adventures it'll bring as I transition into my second career.

**CIAN KELLEHER**

“

I could feel I wasn't anywhere near it but I ignored it cause 'this will never happen to me' but getting the no-go from the surgeon really hit hard. It was all over.

**CONOR KENNY**

“

It's time to sign off. It's been a blast. To everyone I've met and to those who helped me complete a dream, thank you.

**LEAH LYONS**

“

I'm immensely proud of my career. It's sad that it's coming to an end but I'm also very excited to start a new chapter in my life.

**LUKE MARSHALL**



“

Memories I will cherish forever. A dream come true.

**KEVIN O'BYRNE**



“

For the last 15 years I gave it my all for that jersey. I've had many highs and lows throughout the journey, but 2016 will always be my most memorable year! From that amazing day in Edinburgh to my first time representing my country in South Africa, I never would have got to that point without the support of my family, friends and teammates.

**TIERNAN O'HALLORAN**

“

Rugby has given me some of the best days of my life. I've been lucky enough to play alongside some of the games best players and more importantly some of my best mates and that's what I'll miss most of all.

**RORY O'LOUGHLIN**

“

I'm sad to be ending my professional rugby career at this stage. It was a tough decision to make but ultimately, it's the best decision for my long-term health.

**GEORGE SAUNDERSON**



“

I've loved every second, it's been some craic and I can't wait to see what's next.

**SIMON ZEBO**

# Zambbrero

## CATER FOR YOUR CREW

EMAIL US AT [CATERING@ZAMBRERO.IE](mailto:CATERING@ZAMBRERO.IE)



QUESADILLAS



BOWLS



BURRITOS



NACHOS



NACHOS





# A TRANSCENDING INFLUENCE

The Limerick man was recently named as the Zurich Contribution to Irish Society Award winner

**KEITH EARLS**



**Perhaps the most likely explanation for Keith Earls' popularity is contained in that familiar saying about the difficulty of keeping good men down.**

To some, rugby might not be seen as a universal sport, but the Limerick man's appeal transcends all divides. As he stole over for that iconic try on the occasion of his 100th Irish cap at the Aviva Stadium last summer, it certainly seemed like an entire nation applauded in unison. The result of the game was a mere footnote.

At the Rugby Players Ireland Awards, Earls' contributions to the game and beyond were celebrated as he was presented with the prestigious Zurich Contribution to Irish Society Award. It prompted those in attendance, not least Earls himself, to reflect on his triumphs, challenges and the unwavering resilience that has seen him rise against the odds on several fronts.

Born in 1987, Earls grew up in the tight knit but sometimes turbulent neighbourhood of Moyross. Despite the prevalence of gangland feuds and its devastating effects, the Munster man remains immensely proud of his heritage and acknowledges the role it played in shaping him into the man he is today.

Guided by better influences in the area, Earls sidestepped the many pitfalls that surrounded him throughout his childhood. His kicks were to be found on the sports fields. They say it takes a village to raise a child, but Earls' neighbourhood did more



than most and in so doing instilled an unfettered appreciation of community in the youngster.

His parents Sandra and Ger too played their part. Indeed, Ger was a rugby player of some repute and is often cited as one of the best players never to have been capped by his country. He remained of those brave stalwarts who underpinned the game without ever achieving fame or fortune.

Like his father before him, Keith duly found purpose on a rugby field. Given its proximity, Thomond Park had always been in Earls' sights but soon it came to represent opportunity and his route out of trouble. By 19 he was an established presence in a Munster side destined for their second Heineken Cup. He was in Irish squads by 20. A British & Irish Lion by 21.

To those with a keen eye for talent, Keith's rapid rise to prominence may not have come as much of a surprise. However, few could have anticipated the impact and legacy Earls' 16-year professional career would have on the wider community. For beyond Lions tours, European Cups and 101 Irish Rugby caps there lay another story.





As teams began to get to grips with Earls' prodigious talent, it seemed the gods ceased to smile on him as they once had. He suffered a crisis in confidence leading to fierce battles with his own mind, exacerbated by the anxieties that came with living a young life on the edge.

For years, few realised that when cameras focused on Earls, his battle hardened gaze was not always because of the physical specimens running down his channel, but a reflection of the internal struggle he faced getting out there in the first place. It was only when we were first introduced to 'Hank' in Earls' autobiography 'Fight or Flight' that people began to get a clearer understanding of the Limerick man.

Earls' decision to share his bipolar diagnosis of 2013 was a watershed moment for the mental health conversation in Ireland. Instead of crossing the street to congratulate him on his performance at the weekend, people began to do so to thank him for his honesty. To this day his journey continues to inspire those facing similar challenges.

The personification of his destructive alter-ego also served as a catalyst for his on-field renaissance. For much of the early part of his career, Earls' external naysayers remained to be convinced of his worth. Yet when Ireland won the Grand Slam in 2018, Earls was deservedly voted by his peers as their player of the year and any lingering sceptics were silenced.

Six months into retirement, Earls now sits assuredly in Irish Rugby folklore. He has found great solace in his achievements but more in the freedom from the rigors of professional rugby. He left many of his anxieties back in the dressing room and now relishes the simple things with his wife Edel and their three young girls Ella-May, Laurie and Ernie.



His commitment to family and the community remains unbowed. He is an ambassador for the Make-A-Wish Foundation and raised over €20,000 for Barnardos during the pandemic. He is also an ambassador for the McDonald's Youth Opportunity Ireland programme, through whom he strives to empower young people from similar backgrounds to his own, offering guidance and support.

Despite his reserved nature, he has also become a much-respected voice in Irish society, one of those rare individuals who commands the attention of even the giddiest of rooms. His appeal to the public to exercise greater care upon the outbreak of Covid-19 resonated far more than any politician's call for compliance.

Traditionally viewed through the lens of tribalism, rugby's popularity has soared in recent years. While results have played their part, the personalities who have brought it about have been the real game changers. As he began to understand more about himself, we too developed a greater affinity for the winger.

"I spent a lot of years not being myself because I was embarrassed," he told Donald McRae. "I always thought other people were better than me and I'd try and be like them. But I've finally become comfortable with who I am. I understand what I stand for as a person and a rugby player."

In a world often clouded by uncertainty, Keith Earls serves as a reminder that authenticity and integrity are root ingredients for greatness in a person. He was not just a rugby player; he transcended boundaries and has become a symbol of hope and inspiration to so many.

He will forever be remembered as one of the good guys, who happened to be one of the best rugby players this country has ever produced.



 thesleepshop.ie

SLEEP  
RECOVER  
PERFORM



PUT NEW LIFE INTO YOUR MUSCLES.

MUSCLES ARE THE POWER HOUSE OF THE BODY AND THEY NEED TIME TO REPAIR AND REJUVENATE. THE COMFORT AND SUPPORT OF OUR SLEEP SHOP LATEX MATTRESS SOOTHES THE TIGHTNESS IN THE SKELETAL MUSCLES AND LOOSENS THEM UP TO ENSURE A GREAT NIGHTS SLEEP



BECAUSE WE CARE



BECAUSE SLEEP MATTERS



VISIT [WWW.THESLEEPSHOP.IE](http://WWW.THESLEEPSHOP.IE) FOR THE FULL COLLECTION





# FRONT RUNNER.

The new GLE SUV impresses with a redesigned front and a new wheel design. Elegance and confidence from front to back. Know your way. The new GLE.



Mercedes-Benz

