

RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND

MID-SEASON 2024

BEYOND THE GAME

*CHANGE. CARE.
COMMUNITY. CONNECTION.*

STUDENT TO
ENFORCER
JOE MCCARTHY

FROM PITCH
TO PENDANTS
ANNA MCGANN



RUGBY PLAYERS
IRELAND



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CEO ADDRESS

SIMON KEOGH



At the recent 150th anniversary celebrations of Irish Rugby, the great and good of our game gathered to reflect on how far we've come and the legacy that continues to be built. While it was great to have so many iconic names who have left their mark on the national stage, I couldn't help but think of the countless others who contributed so much but never had the chance to stand in that same spotlight.

It's been almost eight years since I took on the role of CEO at Rugby Players Ireland, and in that time, I've seen many players come and go. Yet I believe each of them has left their own unique stamp on our rugby story.

From a players' association perspective, we're still relatively young in the grand scheme of things, but I don't think it's a coincidence that our growth has aligned with an incredible period of on-field success. An inevitable consequence of our improved fortunes has been an increased attention on our players—not just for their abilities, but as individuals. The pressure to perform has never been higher, while they are held to a higher standard in their own time too.

That's why our Player Development Programme and initiatives like the Rookie Camp have become so important. This year, we brought together Ireland's emerging talent to help them prepare for the realities of professional rugby. It's about giving young

players the tools they need to succeed, not just on the pitch but in managing the challenges that come with being a professional athlete.

Earlier in the year we also ran a camp for our Women's XV's and Men's and Women's Sevens Programmes. Many of the Women's XV squad are now centrally contracted and will have felt the heat almost immediately after the women's rugby programme was established at the IRFU. The players had to develop a thick skin to override the criticisms and stay focused on their journey. Now, the benefits of the programme are beginning to take hold and we're seeing the results at the very top table of the women's game.

We've also been working hard behind the scenes to represent players at the highest levels. Our lead role in negotiations for the British & Irish Lions is a great example of the respect in which we are held. Furthermore, our relationships continue to grow internationally with the likes of World Players, the European Athletes and Players Association, FIFPro and International Rugby Players. Irish rugby players are also receiving international recognition too with as many players as I can remember nominated for the World Rugby Awards recently.

Closer to home, our increased involvement with the Irish Athletes Alliance has strengthened the collective voice of athletes across all sports in Ireland. This is where our greatest impact can lie. We are committed to ensuring that our players, no matter their level, are supported, recognised, and prepared for whatever comes their way.



RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND NEWS



LIONS AGREEMENT

A new player agreement will see players selected for 2025 British & Irish Lions Tour to Australia benefit from a profit share model for the first time. The agreement will see the creation of a new partnership model whereby a portion of distributable post-tour profits will be made available for sharing between players.

In addition to the new financial model, the agreement will also result in increased collaboration between the British & Irish Lions and the players, particularly around scheduling and preparation. Working together, they will create the optimum schedule to give the players the best chance to prepare for a successful tour.

Alongside on-the-pitch-preparation, the new agreement will see the British & Irish Lions support players off the pitch through a range of activity and initiatives.

The move was welcomed by representatives of the international sides including Jamie George, Finn Russell, Jac Morgan and Peter O'Mahony.

Rugby Players Ireland played a central role in the negotiations with Simon Keogh appearing on behalf of all players. At the announcement of the new deal, Keogh said: "Players are central to the ongoing success of the British & Irish Lions tours, and we are delighted that their views – including those of Lions heroes of the past – 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."



EUROPEAN ATHLETES AND PLAYERS ASSOCIATION

Members of Rugby Players Ireland's team travelled to Alicante, Spain for the EAPA General Assembly. This year the meeting marked a pivotal moment in the European player movement as a large number of representatives from associations across the continent came together to ensure that the voices of their athletes and players remain at the fore of European sport.

The gathering also facilitated the PROtect Integrity Online Conference which seeks to educate athletes on the promotion of integrity and values in sport, with a focus on match-fixing. Having participated in the project for several years, Rugby Players Ireland will continue to play a part in PROtect Integrity Responsibly which kicks off in 2025.



WORLD RUGBY EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE APPOINTMENT

Former Rugby Players Ireland Chairperson Rob Kearney has been appointed to the Executive Board of World Rugby alongside former Black Fern Melodie Robinson. The historic decision sees players sit at rugby's top table for the first time. Both Kearney and Robinson were appointed following a nomination process led by International Rugby Players.



“

I'm acutely aware of the responsibilities associated with this role and I'm ready to work hard to make sure the collective voice of players is heard and that players are part of the global decision-making process in our sport.

*Rob Kearney
World Rugby Executive Board*

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 several members of Team Ireland in attendance following their Olympic adventure, while others used the day to break from the intensity of their pre-season schedules.



1st

Paul Marshall & Druids Glen

2nd

Darragh Fanning, James Downey & Wasserman

3rd

Dylan O'Grady & Rugby Players Ireland



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Bundee Aki visits LauraLynn

Before the start of the 2024/25 season, Bundee Aki took time out an intensive training schedule to visit LauraLynn, Ireland's Children's Hospice, and to show his support for the children, families, staff, and volunteers who make up a special community. In a visit facilitated by Rugby Players Ireland, Bundee's presence was heartfelt tribute to the incredible work carried out by LauraLynn for families across Ireland.



All-Inclusive Tag Blitz

Will Connors, Max Deegan, Aoife Wafer and Energia ambassador Hugo Keenan formed a formidable team at the Barnhall RFC All-Inclusive Tag Rugby Blitz.

Energia's ongoing commitment to diversity and inclusion presents our members with unique opportunities to connect with people who share passion for rugby. It also reflects our shared dedication to fostering an environment where everyone feels valued, respected, and empowered.

Rugby League Cares

Rugby Players Ireland teamed up with Rugby League Cares for the charity's fundraising bike ride which this year came to Ireland. Established in 2019, RL Cares delivers wellbeing support to rugby league players and maintains regular contact with representatives in other sports to ensure athletes get the best support possible.

The ride builds on the already strong relationship between the two organisations and saw riders, which included several RPI members and staff, take on an epic 300-mile cycling challenge over four days between Cork and Limerick along Ireland's rugged south coast.





BEYOND THE GAME

In 2024 Rugby Players Ireland expanded its support services for retired rugby players with the launch of Beyond the Game. Rugby Players Ireland are delighted to be supported by the Global Rugby Players Foundation (GRPF), World Rugby and the Rugby Players Ireland Foundation in providing proactive, tailored assistance for players transitioning into life after professional or international rugby.

Led by Dr Deirdre Lyons who will act as a dedicated resource for former players, Beyond the Game will focus on four key pillars: Change, Care, Connection, and Community, ensuring that former players receive comprehensive support in all aspects of their post-rugby lives through tailored transition support, career mentoring, and resources that promote mental, physical, social and financial wellbeing, ultimately helping them to thrive in retirement.



Global Rugby Players Foundation

Beyond the Game is supported by the Global Rugby Players Foundation (GRPF), a new charitable organisation founded by 10 prominent former and current rugby stars, including Dan Carter, Jonny Wilkinson, Rachael Burford, and Siya Kolisi. GRPF's mission is to help players around the world navigate the period of adjustment that follows the transition from playing professional rugby to life after sport, through locally tailored, holistic support programmes.

Chaired by former Wallabies captain George Gregan and led by CEO Sara Heath, the GRPF ensures players, regardless of their location, have access to vital resources like mental health support, career coaching, and physical wellbeing programmes.

Through the partnership with GRPF, Beyond the Game will provide players with support in the following ways:

- On-the-ground funding for local players' associations and partners.
- Mental and physical health programmes, including proactive support for wellbeing.
- Career and business coaching to help players define and pursue new career paths.
- Community support via a dedicated app, keeping players connected globally.
- Partnership programmes to create opportunities with organisations and sponsors.

For players, leaving the game is not an end – it's the beginning of a new journey. With Beyond the Game, Rugby Players Ireland and the Global Rugby Players Foundation are ensuring that every player can step into the next phase of their lives with confidence, purpose, and the support they deserve.

PREMIUM HEALTH CLUBS IN DUBLIN'S
PREMIUM LOCATIONS

ICONIC
HEALTH CLUBS

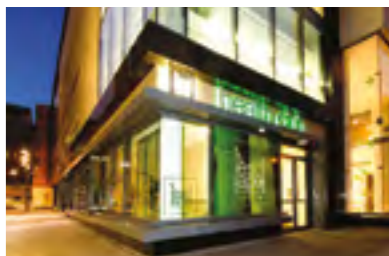
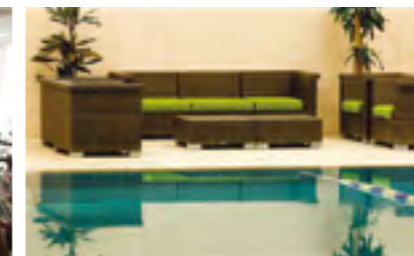
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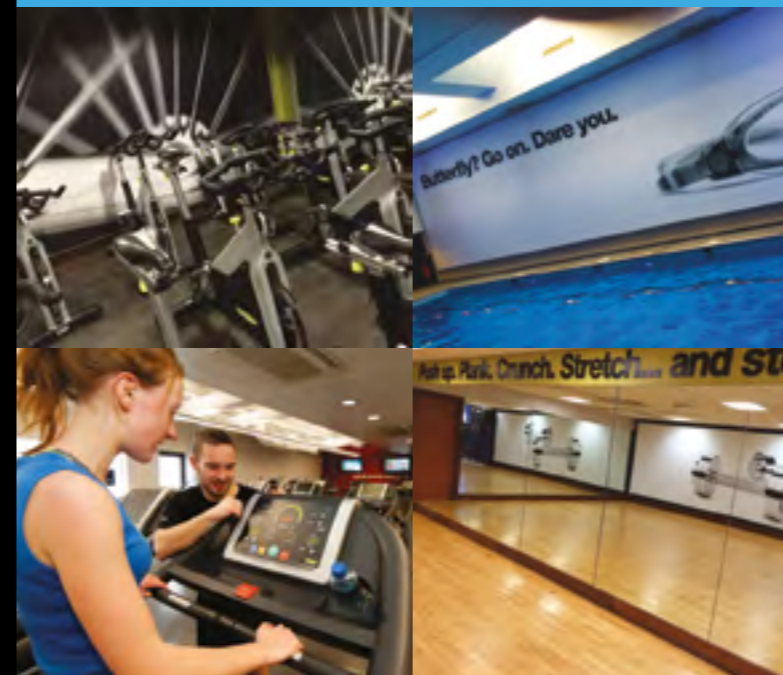
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STUDENT TO ENFORCER

The Global Business Graduate who is taking on the World

JOE MCCARTHY



In their rankings of the Top 100 Men's players in the world, RugbyPass listed Joe McCarthy at No.26. While only a post designed to reel in engagement and debate, it was nevertheless intriguing to see the likes of Siya Kolisi, Gregory Aldritt and Handre Pollard sit below Big Joe on the list.

In 18 months, McCarthy's stock has risen considerably. The Nevin Spence Young Player of the Year has become Ireland's enforcer on the field, boasting a skillset envied by players half his size. Off the field, his big presence always looms large... followed quickly by his untamed mullet. The man is unapologetically himself, happy to chart his own course.

It's hard to reconcile this character then with the 15-year-old who would be summoned from Junior C bench at Blackrock College.

"Nobody saw this coming," McCarthy says, reflecting on his rapid rise through the professional ranks. While his ascent was undoubtedly helped by the bulking frame that he once had to lug between classrooms, even as a youngster McCarthy realised that he needed more than a few extra kilos if he wanted to pursue a career in the game.

Having missed Ireland's victorious Grand Slam campaign of 2023 through injury, McCarthy was still relatively unknown heading into the Rugby World Cup. His selection was quite the achievement, proving that in addition to size McCarthy also had a robust no-backward-step mentality.



Just ask Flip van der Merwe and James Horwill.

Months after leaving secondary school, McCarthy encountered the duo when he lined out for Trinity College in their annual clash with Cambridge University. Facing a former Springbok and ex-Wallaby captain with nearly 100 Test caps between them would test the resolve of most but instead it was McCarthy who dominated the contest. It was the first substantive proof in his elite rugby pudding.

"Throughout this journey I've had many coaches and people who thought I wasn't good enough," McCarthy reveals. "In some ways I'm thankful for them because it gave me a bit of a chip on my shoulder. I've proved them wrong so far and now I couldn't think of a better job than coming into Leinster and training with my best mates every day."

Brimming with undoubted potential, McCarthy also remains full of questions. He has an insatiable appetite to learn and progress. Now part of the furniture in both Irish and Leinster engine rooms, his growth mindset ensures he will not be one to rest on his laurels.



This approach is reflected across several aspects of his young life. Indeed, throughout his career to date McCarthy has remained committed to his academic pursuits. During the Autumn Nations Series, McCarthy slipped away from Irish camp to attend his graduation ceremony at Trinity College.

"I plan to use my Global Business degree to make a positive impact in the sports industry, particularly in promoting inclusion and diversity," McCarthy says with a perspective that has already started to fuel his advocacy efforts.

Amongst many other initiatives, last year both Joe and his brother (and Leinster teammate) Paddy linked up with Rugby Players Ireland to lead an inclusive coaching session with students from the Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities (TCPID).

McCarthy's sustained commitment to inclusion stems from personal experience. His older brother Andrew, who has Down's syndrome, has inspired him to view sport as a powerful tool for empowerment.

"Andrew's involvement in sport has also shown to me the kind of positive impact it can have on individuals with disabilities," McCarthy shares. "He's a massive sports fan. He plays with a tag rugby team called Seapoint Dragons, loves his basketball, is big into Manchester United and adores the Leinster and Ireland rugby teams.

"I've actually gone down to coach him at Seapoint a few times. It's always good craic being around him and the lads. They bring such good energy and don't worry about the small things in life, they just enjoy where they are.

"I find it all very rewarding and being able to share my passion for rugby to help foster an inclusive environment is very easy for me to do. It's really all about creating opportunities for everyone of all shapes, sizes and abilities to feel part of something bigger,"

It's an endearing dimension of McCarthy's character that sits at odds with his edgy and confrontational on-field demeanour. It doesn't end there either. While Big Joe is well known by Kolsi, Aldritt and Pollard for his physicality and game intelligence, they



I plan to use my Global Business degree to make a positive impact in the sports industry, particularly in promoting inclusion and diversity.

might not clock that he places equal importance on his mental preparation.

"I meditate a bit," he reveals. "Before I go to bed I like to lie on a spike mat and lose myself for a few minutes. I think about a good carry or a strong breakdown clear-out, things like that. Always positive thoughts.

"Sometimes I might think about being in a game. How are you reacting if you go behind by a few scores? The way I see it, if I have thought about it beforehand, I'm not going to be shocked if it happens for real.

"It's a little painful at first," he says of the spike mat. "But you relax into it. It's a good pain, though. You know when you like floss your teeth and it's kinda sore but it's kinda nice as well? Usually, I'll do ten minutes and by the end I don't want to get off it!"

McCarthy's curiosity and willingness to try new things has become a big factor in his career propulsion. Of course, some might say he's left with little choice when surrounded by competitive characters who each have their own designs on getting ahead.

"It's crazy competitive at Leinster," he muses. "You have to be ready to perform not only in the games but at every training session. It's tough and highly pressurised but I do find it brings out the best in me.

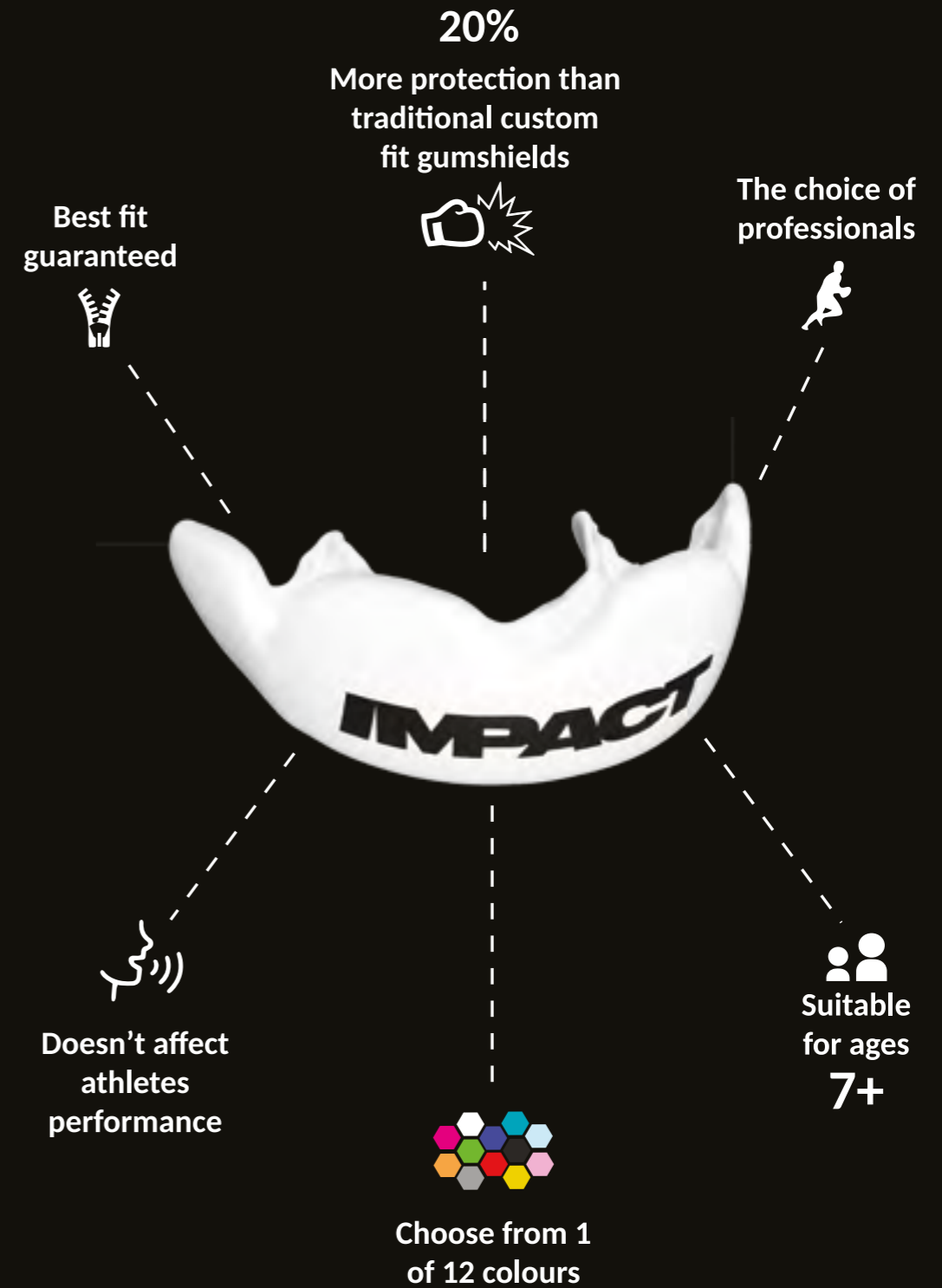
"Everyone has their own way of doing things, to try and get ahead. For me, a complete switch-off can just as important sometimes. Whether it's college lectures, or coaching my brother at Seapoint, the things you do can be as fulfilling and as refreshing as you want them to be.

"Ultimately, my focus is on representing both Ireland and Leinster, playing to the best of my ability and contributing to their success. When young players ask me for advice, I tell them to work hard, to stay disciplined, and to be resilient.

"I'd also tell them to keep an open mind. There's no set way of doing anything."



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Ulster winger is using his profile for positive influence

ZAC WARD



Zac, can you tell us about a pivotal moment in your life when you became aware of the importance of mental health.

I think the first thing that probably comes to mind is off the back of the Olympics. We were made aware of what they call the 'Olympic Blues', a low period that follows the Games. To be honest, I didn't pay much heed to it until I had a moment to myself a few weeks after Paris and I began to ask myself: 'well, what do I do now?' You're struck by the reality that you're unlikely to scale those heights again. Thanks to the warnings we'd been given I managed to notice how I was feeling, and I realised it was something I needed to address.

What drew you to the Tackle Your Feelings (TYF) campaign?

I first came across Tackle Your Feelings when I joined the Irish 7s programme. There was a TYF lounge at the High-Performance Centre where players are encouraged to chill out and switch out of rugby mode. I remember asking the lads what TYF was all about and Billy Dardis took the time to explain it in great detail – as only Billy can!

From there I began to read into the campaign a little bit more. While TYF was targeted at young students, I actually found a lot of the tools being used were either very beneficial for me, or I was using them already. In some ways TYF helped to give me a bit of a language that I felt comfortable using and through that I was better able to combat the negative feelings that popped into my head. It made sense of what can go on in there from time to time. Once I got a better handle on it, I felt I had a part to play in getting the TYF message out there.



What does it mean to now be part of the Tackle Your Feelings community as an ambassador?

I take great pride in the fact that I'm able to be an ambassador for the Tackle Your Feelings programme. I think the work that is being done is vital. The awareness that TYF has created is massive but there is still a stigma associated with mental health. Lots done, plenty more to do.

I think helping young people – whether they are in school or not - and giving them ways to manage their mental wellbeing is really important. They're the kind of tools that will stand to them in all walks of life as they grow older.

Where do you see rugby sit within that wellbeing framework?

It wasn't very long ago that talking about mental health would have been taboo in the rugby world. I think it's definitely improved, and that is in no small part because of what Tackle Your Feelings and similar campaigns have done in terms of awareness and giving players literacy around their mental health.

Don't get me wrong, there's always room to improve and things we can be doing to get better. But having said that, I think in the teams that I've been a part of with Ireland or Ulster we're being encouraged to talk things out. There's been a growing appreciation that if you can get on top of things off the pitch, it can benefit your on-field performance.

On top of that, we're very lucky as athletes to have access to sports psychologists, while through Rugby Players Ireland's Mental Wellbeing Service we can avail of counselling support, for which there is no threshold. It's a bit of a cliché but a problem shared is a problem halved.



Do you have any tips or techniques that you use to make sure that you stay on top of things?

I would. From a mental side perspective, I do a few things. I do a bit of journaling and was delighted to receive a Reflection Journal from Rugby Players Ireland last year which I use every day.

I've also got into the habit of doing some mindfulness. It's been getting more attention recently thanks to Johnny Sexton who spoke about it in an interview. He said that while he was very sceptical at first, ultimately he found it very beneficial and believes that it contributed to the longevity of his career at the highest level.

For many athletes, these practices have become part of their routines but without things like Tackle Your Feelings and the interest it has generally created, nobody would get those insights.

Like Johnny, I've found mindfulness to be a really, really great technique to centre yourself. It helps me to take a step back, to relax and to look at things through a different lens.



Do you have any tips or techniques that you use to make sure that you stay on top of things?

100% - on and off the field. As a young lad I used to get really hung up on my mistakes in a game. They would sit with me for a couple of days. I couldn't let them go. I thought it was a normal way of dealing with and so I never tried to make sense of it or anything.

I think if I had access to a programme like TYF, I think I would have dealt with those thoughts better. I definitely would have been better at letting things go and in turn I think I would have been able to make better progress because I would have wasted less energy worrying over things that had been and gone.

It was the same with exams. As I mentioned, I could get nervous and would often second guess my ability. With TYF, I think I would have been able to park those concerns. I might have been able to better direct my thoughts towards the things I did know, rather than the stuff I didn't.

The theme for International Men's Day earlier this year was positive role models. At TYF we've been very lucky to have several male ambassadors, yet it can be difficult to convince them to get involved. Why did you choose to do so?

While it has decreased, there's no getting away from the fact that there's still a stigma associated with mental health, especially for men. Talking about their feelings or whatever is going on in their head, isn't generally the done thing. In my own experience, it's something I definitely struggled with. Rugby people are supposed to be mentally and physically strong without any weaknesses.

That's where TYF comes in. I knew plenty of players who supported the campaign, and I read into their reasons why. Most didn't have a 'story' and I related to that. They understood that as role models they could have a positive influence on the people TYF was trying to get to.

I'm very appreciative of the position I'm in. It's been a bit of a journey and it hasn't always been easy. Everyone has their bumps in the road. I think it's a privilege to represent TYF and help the next guy or the next girl coming through. You never know what might resonate with someone.

I often think of Paddy Pimblett, the UFC fighter who spoke up about mental health after losing a close friend shortly before a fight in 2022. I think his clip transcended his sport, and a lot of people realised that mental health is something we need to address. You could literally feel the impact it had.

I think having someone you look up to talk about this stuff is so, so important. You realise that these people who you can think are superhuman, are not so different at all.

Do you remember any time in your life when you turned to someone for help?

I remember it well. I was in my first year at Hartpury University. We were approaching our first set of exams and for some reason I began to get really, really in on myself. I was anxious and nervous and even though I knew I'd put the work in, I couldn't convince my mind that I had.

At University it's easy to feel like a small fish in a big pond. You can feel a bit anonymous. I wasn't aware of anyone I could speak to, and I closed off any other opportunities to get it off my chest. I really went in on myself and tried to go it alone until I opened up to my family about how I was feeling.

If I was back in those shoes again, I'd tell myself to go speak to someone. Anyone. It doesn't have to be a psychologist. Speak to friends. Speak to family. The very act of saying it out loud can often help you to make better sense of the way you're feeling.

“

I wish I had access to a programme like TYF Schools when I was growing up. It's so important for young people to learn how to manage stress, build resilience, and talk openly about their mental health.

This ready-to-go programme provides teachers with the resources they need to help their students understand their own positive mental wellbeing, and they can even get something out of it themselves.

Calvin Nash



“

As athletes, we know that mental strength is just as important as physical strength. That's why we're proud to support the TYF Schools programme and broaden awareness of the positive impact these tools can have on students nationwide. By prioritising wellbeing in the classroom, teachers are making a real difference in the lives of young people across Ireland.

Christy Haney



“

It has been brilliant to see the impact of the TYF programme in schools nationwide and I was delighted to be part of the Seven Lessons with Rugby 7s this year. We understand the importance of mental health in sport, and it's equally crucial in everyday life.

Béibhinn Parsons



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FROM PITCH TO PENDANTS

Navigating Life's Challenges as an Athlete,
Entrepreneur and Daughter

ANNA MCGANN



Anna McGann revels in a challenge. They're not always welcome but each one has forged a stronger link in the chain of her resilience.

Her life has been full of them over the past few years, testing her mettle in ways few could have anticipated. The launch of her jewellery brand, Chaos The Label, emerges from one such testing period, standing as a testament to her bravery and determination - attributes that mirror her playing style on the rugby pitch.

For much of the past 18 months, McGann's life has revolved around her efforts to make it back to full fitness after an ACL injury. A member of the Ireland Women's 7s squad that qualified for the Olympic Games, McGann suddenly found herself in a race against time to be fit for Paris 2024.

Having played a key role in securing Ireland's golden ticket to the global showpiece, McGann got back to work. She was keenly aware that there were only twelve places up for grabs and the competition was increasingly fierce. However, just a month after experiencing the highlight of her playing career, McGann tore her cruciate ligament at a Rugby Europe event in the Algarve.

While she would return in the weeks leading into the Games, McGann was ultimately left with too big a mountain to climb. Throughout her recovery, the dream of becoming an Olympian remained her guiding star, but there's a limit to how much focus one can give to rugby when sidelined from the action.

She soon began to find respite from the frustrations of a tight timeframe by channelling her energies in a new direction... although it wasn't an entirely revelatory experience.



"From a young age I knew that I wanted to have my own business one day," she shares. "You could say it's in my blood because my mother had her own dressmaking business. Seeing her thrive in her own creative way really inspired me.

"Her influence meant that fashion and jewellery always intrigued me as a kid. Unfortunately, I wasn't brave enough wear anything different back then. I towed the line like most do.

"It's only really in recent years and as my confidence has grown that I've been able to express myself a bit more and tap into the different sides of my character. I think a lot of that has come from being surrounded by such influential and empowering women."

McGann has never underestimated the importance of her teammates. A close-knit group, they have been known to rally around each other in times of need. While everyone had a part to play, she was particularly grateful to have the likes of Kathy Baker and Eve Higgins by her side for much of the recovery trail - a shared journey that brought moments of comfort and camaraderie.

Still, there were days when McGann simply wanted to be left alone. The daunting nature of the path to full fitness could feel overwhelming at times and the weight of her reality would hit her like an unexpected punch. She needed space to recalibrate and it was in those quiet, reflective periods that a new purpose began to emerge.

“
It's only really in recent years and as my confidence has grown that I've been able to express myself a bit more and tap into the different sides of my character.

"I remember feeling very sorry for myself at first," McGann reveals. "I had my bad moments, I had my bad days, I had my tears. All I could see was this long and winding road ahead of me and I realised that I needed something to help me out of a dangerous slump."

"Nine months is a long time if you choose to look at it that way but once we got the surgery booked in and began to make a plan around my recovery, I started to reframe it as an opportunity."

"The following week I began to google things like 'how to run a business.' I reconnected with my EY mentor who shared a few tricks of the trade. From there I did plenty of research, I started developing a website and I also managed to find a supplier!"

"All I was missing was a name!"

Creating her brand proved to be a family affair. Sitting in the kitchen at home, McGann began to brainstorm and duly landed upon several viable

“
I had my bad moments, I had my bad days, I had my tears.”

options. However, her mother and sister advised that while there were cool names in the mix, the winner needed to carry a deeper meaning.

'Chaos,' though an amusing reflection of McGann's whirlwind life - a source of endless amusement for her family - seemed to hit the right note. More than just a quirky name, it perfectly captured the spirit of her journey and became the foundation for a brand that has quickly grown into a well-thought-out and carefully structured business.

"I was very naïve as to how difficult and intricate the process would be just to get the ball rolling," McGann admits. "It has certainly kept me on my toes. Thankfully people like Aoife Lane at Rugby Players Ireland have been able to help me focus on the excitement rather than the fear."

"Yet while I'm very grateful for all the support I've received, I sometimes struggle to get away from the reality that everything relies on me to function."



"I suppose you could say it's a bit like sport. If I drop the ball, everything stops. That's a lot of pressure for any one person to handle but when you are exposed to those high-pressurised environments so often you begin learn how to get on top of them as best you can and keep going."

Despite her capacity to keep trucking on, McGann acknowledges that the wheels very nearly came off her business venture entirely when she narrowly missed out on selection for the Olympics.

"That was heartbreaking," McGann concedes. "It was probably that little bit harder because I was named as a reserve, so I knew just how close I had come. Thankfully, I had the business to distract me from the disappointment for a little bit every day."

"I think that whole experience made me rethink the whole dual career stuff. Balancing a career in professional sport with college or establishing a business is very difficult, but if you love doing something then you'll make time for it."

"You might put that to me in a few months' time and I'll think a little differently," she adds, "but for now Chaos is definitely my release!"

Chaos' first line launches this week. Dubbed the 'OG Collection,' it is dedicated to the strong women McGann has encountered throughout her life, but particularly her mum, Terry.

"My mother is the definition of strength," McGann says. "Unfortunately, I lost my Dad last August. It's been an incredibly difficult time for us as a family. We've all dealt with it in our own way and have taken time to find our feet again."

"Throughout it all, my mother has been a pillar of strength. Not only strong for her kids, but for herself too. I'm in awe of her every day. She is my inspiration."

"One of the biggest steps in this whole venture was sharing my idea for Chaos with her. As a former designer it would have been easy for her to pick holes in my plans. Yet, from the very outset she has backed me to the hilt. She never doubted me, even when I began to doubt myself."

"As any businessperson will know, it's not always plain sailing. There were days when I felt the walls crumbling in on top of me and that I wasn't able. Mum never saw it that way. She stepped in - as she always does - and set me back on the straight and narrow, reminding me that she believes in me and what I am doing."

"That's the greatest testimonial anyone can ever receive."

While Chaos is still in its infancy, McGann is appreciative of how far she has come in what has been the most significant chapter in her life. Personal growth has been an unintended consequence.



As she looks back on her first design samples, McGann can't help but laugh.

"Everyone has to start somewhere," she says. "That's probably the hardest part. Many of us have the seeds of ideas in our heads but don't have the conviction to follow through with them. I'm so proud to see how far Chaos has come in that time."

"The entrepreneurial spirit you need comes from my Dad," she believes. "I miss being able to go to him for advice. He always knew the right thing to say. I'm sure he'd love to have been able to be part of this adventure, but equally I don't think Chaos would ever have existed without his lasting impact."

"Dad was always a firm believer that if you want to do something with your life, go do it. It can be scary and you will have to face down some incredibly tough days but if you put the hard work in, stay with it and believe in it, you can achieve what you aspire for."

"Dad always told me to aim high, so I have always had big dreams. Now I'm making them happen."

HerForm

In 2022, Rugby Players Ireland secured EU Erasmus Plus funding to launch HerForm, a project addressing the unique challenges faced by elite female athletes transitioning into high-performance sports, often lacking the structured pathways of their male counterparts. In partnership with the Spanish Women Futsal Players Association, TWIN, NYSA, South African Cricketers' Association, the German Sports

University of Cologne, and the European Commission, HerForm has identified key areas of concern for female athletes: contract negotiation, sponsorship, post-maternity returns, mental health, and personal branding. Building on these findings Rugby Players Ireland is now working closely its project partners to create a digital learning platform that will focus on these key areas.

RESEARCH REPORT

132

The total number of high-level female athletes from different team sports across the globe who participated in the project



25.9
Mean age of participants

17
Different countries (10 European Union)

37%
In the early stage of their career

29%
In the mid stage of their career

42%
In the late stage of their career

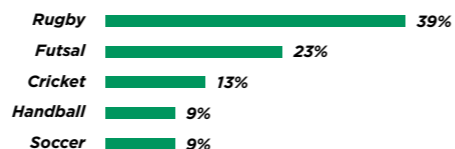
7%
Competed on an Olympic level

59%
Competed on an international level

33%
Competed on a national level

approx. 1 in 3
Had a high school diploma

Most popular sport athletes participated in



Career Stages

Early-stage athletes

Contract negotiation, return to sport after having a child, obtain sponsorship contracts, develop and manage a personal brand, manage mental health, deal with sexist/racist comments, social media.

Middle-stage athletes

Contract negotiation, return to sport after having a child, obtain sponsorship contracts, adapt training to menstrual cycle, develop and manage personal brand, manage mental health.

Late-stage athletes

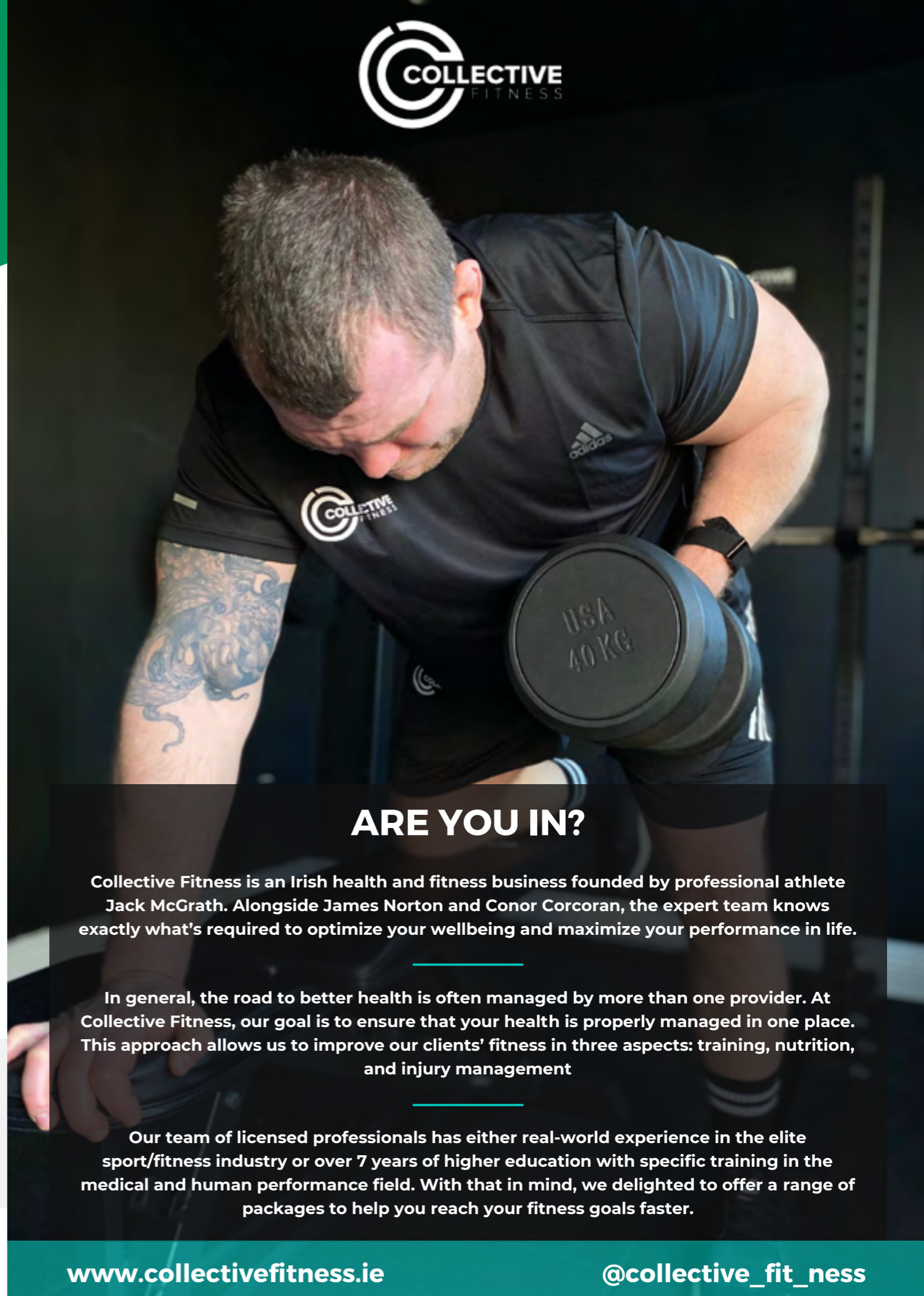
Obtain sponsorship contracts, return to sport after having a child, contract negotiation, develop and manage a personal brand, balance sport and family life.

Overall, when all athletes are grouped together, the most important topics for them are: Contract negotiation, obtain sponsorship contracts, return to sport after having a child, manage mental health and develop and manage a personal brand.

Key Topics

Five focus groups were conducted in five countries. Overall, 43 participants took part. The following topics echoed throughout most of the groups.

- Lack of Information:** Too little information around areas such as nutrition, sleep, contract negotiation and group dynamics.
- Lack of Proper Support Structure:** Often personal development support consists of colleagues and own private structures. Feeling alone and less supported in critical phases of sport careers such as tournaments or injuries.
- Lack of Diversity:** Many female athletes feel more comfortable discussing private matters with same gender coaches or support staff.
- Perfection Mindset:** Puts high pressure and fear of failure onto athletes and may result in physical and mental harm.
- Workshops:** Many athletes are open for workshops to improve their sporting performance.



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.

BILLY'S SCENE

Former Irish 7s Captain is Leading in a New Direction

BILLY DARDIS

When the two lads crossed each other's path on Pembroke Street, a mixture of trepidation and giddiness was etched across their faces. Like schoolboys on the first day of class, Billy Dardis and Terry Kennedy were bracing for the unknown.

It wasn't quite the drama of stepping onto the Stade de France, but the stakes, to them, seemed just as high. Not sure whether to laugh or to bolt, they masked their nerves as they approached the front door of the TritonLake office before simultaneously pausing.

"Erm, Terry..." Billy began as he shifted the weight of the gear bag on his shoulder, "do you know what gym we can go to?"

The uncertainty of life after rugby had already begun to reveal itself in small, mundane moments like these.

After a contrasting few weeks, both were on a level corporate playing field now. Having captained the Irish 7s to unprecedented heights, Billy's professional tenure came to a disappointing close as he missed out on selection for the Olympics. Kennedy, on the other hand, was still reeling from an earlier than expected exit from the tournament.

Now, rugby retirement and all the new possibilities that came with it stretched out before them. But first, day one in corporate Ireland had to be navigated.



"We were actually pretty lucky that we had each other in those first few days" Dardis reflects. "There was a lot of basic stuff we had to get to grips with and exercise, which was once part and parcel of our day, was now something we had to plan into our busy working lives."

Almost six months into retirement, it seems Dardis has a firm grasp on things. Head of Operations & Partnerships at TritonLake, he also has a number of other interesting projects on the go.

However, it hasn't been a complete departure. Indeed, the former Irish Men's 7s captain has been appointed to the board of the Rugby Players Ireland Foundation, while he also ensures to meet an old teammate for a coffee every week to keep connections flowing.

Following Ireland's Olympic journey, there are a number of his former teammates who have a bit more time for the social stuff these days. Of all teams currently on the SVNS circuit, the men's side has experienced the greatest turnover and so the Irish 7s 'OAP' WhatsApp group is very active, with Dardis at the heart of it.

"In fairness, I think I've hit the ground running," he says. "I'm proud of the work I put into my post-rugby career while I was still playing. I got my education, built a solid network and I dipped my toes into the workplace. It has all made an enormous difference."

That's not to say Dardis' experience of the transition was all roses. Despite returning to the form that saw him lead the Irish 7s for several seasons, Dardis found himself squeezed out of the final Olympics picture.

"Unfortunately, I was a bit bitter about that ending for quite a while," Dardis confesses. "I see that in me now. I've tried to shut it out of my mind but I remember my last few weeks very vividly. In the final few days before the lads flew to Paris, their families were invited in to wish them well. I remember that being a quite a difficult one to navigate."

"It should have been a wonderful moment in my career but instead, I trudged away from that session with the names of my selected teammates ringing in my ears as they were each announced and celebrated."



True to Dardis' style, he nevertheless returned to the IRFU High-Performance Centre over the following days to help the girls prepare. He was also keen to keep his body ticking over. Just in case.

"Until the lads walked onto the pitch in that first game, I still felt there was a chance I could play. I made sure to stay fit over those last few weeks and when I was packing my bag to fly to Paris as a supporter, I threw in a pair of boots and my gumshield. I kept telling myself that anything could happen."

"Then the day they walked on, I was like 'right, that's done,' and I went to order a beer."

"I have to say I enjoyed every part of the Olympics except the Irish games, if I'm honest. I felt so detached. Having been so involved over the years, I was one of thousands, millions even, looking on from the outside."

"Pretty quickly I found myself thinking that I wasn't good enough to be out there and that made me feel even further away from it."

Except Dardis doesn't really think that. He knows that but for the bounce of a ball, he could have been. He'd still argue his case for inclusion today if given the chance. Yet, as he sat in the stands in Paris his mind had to find some kind of compromise.

"Somehow, I found the ability to look at the bigger picture and I think that was helped by the fact that I was staying with Sean Cribbin's mum and his girlfriend's family. Sean had actually been part of both teams that qualified for the Olympics but had missed out on selection for Tokyo before travelling as a reserve to Paris."

"A few games into the tournament, the squad began to pick up a few injuries and we caught wind that Sean might actually get to play. Between Sean's girlfriend and I, we booked flights for his brother and sister who were back in Dublin and we got some tickets without letting on to anyone."

"It had been a difficult few years for the family. Sean's dad passed away a few years ago and I just thought that it was at times like this that they all should be together."

The next morning, Dardis arranged to meet the siblings at the stadium and was duly thrilled by the Cribbins' ecstatic, albeit quizzical reactions.

"At that stage, none of them knew that Sean was about to become an Olympian, so I had to break up the excitement and hurry them along to their seats. Something special was about to happen. It was epic."

Dardis took great pride and satisfaction in witnessing the Cribbin family cheering Sean on along with 80,000 people in the Stade de France. With Dardis' competitive hat on, he might have found himself begrudging Cribbin his moment. Instead, he was filled with immense pride that all along he had been part of something far greater.



"I always thought highly of Sean," Dardis says. "I remember when he was dropped ahead of Tokyo and I could barely look him in the eye. I didn't know what to do and to this day I regret that I wasn't able to say something. Anything at all. Now that I've gone through it myself, I realise how much an arm around the shoulder helps."

As a professional athlete, Dardis has experienced his fair share of disappointment. A prodigious young talent, he recalls being let go from Leinster and not telling a sinner. For almost three months he ploughed on, reluctant to shatter the facade. He decided not to employ the same tact on this occasion.

"I felt I was coming good which is why I really had to battle with the decision," he says of his non-selection. "It was difficult because I was angry and while I was experiencing one of the worst weeks of my life, my best friends were enjoying their finest.

"I tried to put on a brave face as best I could, so much so that people thought I had taken the news quite well. In actual fact, it was eating me up on the inside. Thankfully I decided not to bottle it up and I leaned on our psychologist and my family and friends for a lot of support.

"As it happened, the day after the squad was announced I had a Tackle Your Feelings Workshop. I really didn't know if I'd have the strength to do it but it was very late in the day and I didn't want to let anyone down.

"Looking back, I provided some really raw insights that morning. I was describing my feelings very much in the moment. It ended up being a very cathartic experience and allowed me to open the door to my emotions at the time."

Still just 29, the closing chapters of his professional career have ensured that Dardis is happy to remain on the sidelines. A cameo at the recent Bermuda World Rugby Classic served to cement his decision after some encounters on the pitch as well as witnessing the intensity of a stacked and physical South African side featuring Willem Alberts, Zane Kirchner, JJ Engelbrecht and Ruan Pienaar.

Yet despite the circumstances surrounding his exit, Dardis counts himself lucky. He's aware that there are many players in the system who simply don't have the option of retiring. Despite waning powers, a mental check-out or niggling injuries, they have nothing to turn to, something he feels responsible to help change.

More recently, Dardis has found increased clarity and closure. He is relishing his new purpose which has allowed him greater freedom to reflect and cherish a

unique Irish career in green. He is also grateful to have had the opportunity to say goodbye to the game on the grandest of stages.

"The World Rugby Awards in Monaco was a peak moment for me really," he beams. "Harry [McNulty] and I were there as guests and not to pick up any awards and so we were determined to enjoy ourselves. It's not every day you can have cocktails over lunch in Monaco!

"Next thing we see Eddie Jordan across the road whilst watching a cycling race around the harbour, and he beckoned us over. He was a lovely man and as a big rugby fan he was very interested in our careers. He ended up inviting us to a pub nearby to watch Australia play Scotland.

"Anyways, we had to race back to the hotel that evening to get ready for the Awards ceremony. We caught up with Terry, Erin [King], Aoife [Wafer] and as we entered the event, all the Irish crew were sent to a table at the top of the room.

"I thought it was a joke when I was sent in the opposite direction. Table 53 or something. I had briefly forgotten I wasn't there as a member of the Irish 7s. I had been invited to represent the Global Rugby Players Foundation.

"As I made my way through the room I saw Eddie talking to Brian O'Driscoll and so I veered in their direction before realising they were actually at my table along with George Gregan, Victor Matfield, John Eales, Sergio Parisse, Alan Wyn-Jones, Dan Biggar and Ken Owens. I spent the night literally star struck.

"Granted, it's not the pinnacle of the game per se but as I watched the best players in the world receive their awards while sitting at a table full of rugby royalty, I had to admit that I thought about an 8-year-old Billy Dardis.

"I think he would have been very proud."

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HALL OF FAME

With the launch of 'Beyond the Game,' Rugby Players Ireland has taken a significant step forward in supporting retired players. Supported by the Global Rugby Players Foundation, Beyond the Game is a comprehensive and dedicated programme designed to help former players navigate life after rugby.

The Heineken Rugby Players Ireland Hall of Fame reflects our commitment to our past player network which has recently seen Dr Deirdre Lyons undertake a new role as a dedicated resource to this community.

This year we were delighted to honour three outstanding figures in Irish Rugby history - Lynne Cantwell, Marcus Horan, and Donncha O'Callaghan - by inducting them into our Hall of Fame. In an event hosted by Darren Cave and embellished with tales from Fiona Coghlan, Denis Fogarty and Frankie Sheahan, they joined a celebrated group that includes legends of the Irish game such as Brian O'Driscoll, Fiona Coghlan, Ronan O'Gara, and the late Anthony Foley.

With friends, family and teammates in attendance, the event not only recognised the former players on-field accomplishments but also highlighted the enduring impact of their respective legacies on Ireland's rugby community.



Ireland's most capped female player, Lynne Cantwell made 86 appearances for her country spanning a 13-year period. During this time, she was integral to Ireland's historic achievements, including their 2013 Six Nations Grand Slam and the iconic victory over New Zealand at the 2014 Women's Rugby World Cup. Since her retirement, Cantwell has been a tireless advocate for the development of women's rugby globally, playing an influential role as the High-Performance Manager for South African women's rugby. In January she takes on a new role at the IRFU as Head of Women's Strategy.

Marcus Horan was a cornerstone of the Munster and Ireland front row during a period of sustained success for both teams. The Clare native earned 67 caps for Ireland and was a key player during the 2009 Grand Slam campaign. Horan also enjoyed tremendous success with Munster, winning two Heineken Cups (2006, 2008) and multiple Celtic League titles. Known for his consistency and durability, Horan was revered for his work ethic and commitment to the team, playing a vital role in Munster's forward dominance throughout the



Our rugby journeys are very unpredictable which for me is where the adventure lives. I've got to experience that time with some incredible people and to be recognised by those peers is very humbling. I am beyond grateful for the opportunities rugby has given me and hope I am using that to reflect progress for women and girls in the game.

Lynne Cantwell



This is an amazing honour. Rugby is about team, not individuals, so to be recognised in this way is very special. I've been lucky to have had a long career, surrounded by great players and friends. It's moments like this that allow you to reflect on what an incredible journey it has been.

Donncha O'Callaghan



2000s. In his current role, Horan continues to give back to the game through his role as Rugby Players Ireland's Player Development Manager with Munster Rugby.

One of Irish rugby's most beloved characters, Donncha O'Callaghan enjoys similar popularity both on and off the pitch. A fierce competitor, O'Callaghan made 94 appearances for Ireland, featuring in three Rugby World Cups and the Grand Slam triumph of 2009. In all, O'Callaghan's career spanned 20 years and also encompassed 268 appearances for Munster Rugby, two Heineken Cups, two Lions tours and a spell with Worcester Warriors with whom he retired at 38 years of age in 2018. His longevity in the sport is a testament to his professionalism and unquestionable passion. Off the pitch, O'Callaghan continues to play a prominent role in Irish society as a broadcaster bringing his humour and insight to Irish people across the country.



It's a real privilege to be recognised alongside such incredible players in Irish rugby history. Rugby has given me everything - lifelong friends, unforgettable moments, and a deep sense of belonging. To be inducted into the Hall of Fame is a wonderful way to reflect on those times with those closest to me.

Marcus Horan

'I'M PROUD OF WHAT I ACHIEVED'

Former teenage star reflects on his life in rugby and starting on a new professional path

ANDREW CONWAY



In the next few months, Andrew Conway and his wife Liz will pack up their house in Castletroy, strap Caelan and Hailey into the back of the car and move back to Dublin, closing a significant chapter in their lives.

Conway was 21 when he made the move initially in 2013, with Liz following some time later – a move he credits as a key moment in him fulfilling his potential. He leaves at 33, with a lifetime of experience behind him and a new life to look forward to.

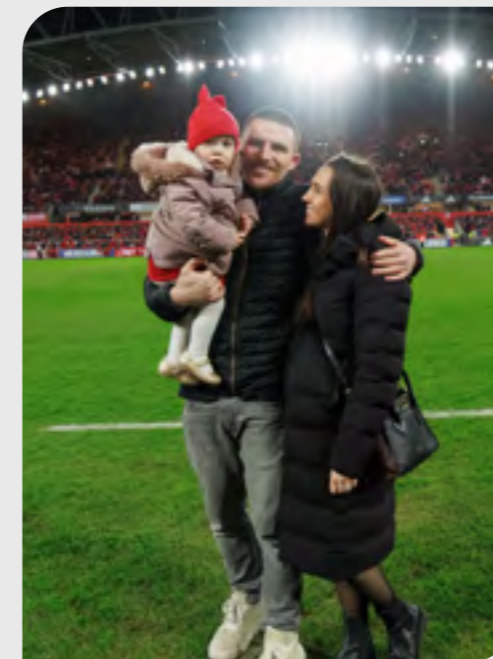
That potential was huge.

When he was a teenager, Conway's name rang out around the schools' scene, the latest Blackrock College wunderkind, the Ireland U-20s record try-scorer who'd made the Leinster senior team when still young enough to play in the Senior Cup had he opted to repeat his Leaving Certificate.

He spent a decade in Munster red and would likely be a regular starter this season had he not been forced to retire last year due to a persistent knee injury that he just couldn't recover from.

Instead, he's had to grapple with the end of an excellent professional sports career, while planning the launch of his sports performance business in the new year. He will have plenty to offer, not least because of his lived experience.

No sporting career is linear and Conway went from being the next big thing to fretting about Munster letting him go at the end of his first contract, turning things around to the extent that he won the trust of Joe Schmidt and Andy Farrell, becoming an Ireland regular.



It was chasing last year's World Cup that hastened his end, but he pushed himself knowing he could play a significant role if he was able to make it back.

Instead, he bowed out with a statement on November 9 last year, having played 150 times for Munster and 30 times for Ireland after reinventing himself as a combative, spiky and dangerous winger known for his hard work and unwillingness to take a backwards step.

"I am, to be honest," Conway says when we put it to him that he must be proud to have achieved what he did considering how things looked in his early years at Munster.

"It was a big section of my life, because if I do throw it away and I've then got to live with that; that has a bad knock-on effect for things going forward and further down the line.

"So, what I'm proudest of is just the continual readjusting and moving forward. People probably would have laughed to me when I said, 'I'm going to play for Ireland' or 'I'm going to be a world-class rugby player'...

"I kept chipping away and I had some instinctual belief in myself that I was going to get to that level and I was going to thrive at it.

"I don't know why, because there was no real proof of it. But I dug in and just continually invested and reinvested in myself constantly from 23, 24 to when I retired.

"I didn't put a ceiling on where it could go and maybe the experiences I had in the earlier part of my career allowed me to take the shackles off and not be restricted by what other people believed in terms of where my ceiling lay, I created a different ceiling for myself.

"I was just trying to constantly chase and see where I could get on that. So, yeah, proud of the journey."

Whereas now, players of high potential are taught about professionalism from a young age; Conway's experience was a bit more sink or swim.

"By February [2010], I was playing for Leinster; I think four or five times that year, when I could have been playing the schools' cup in the same month. I certainly wasn't mature enough or old enough to be in those environments. I was a young 18 as well," he recalls.

"And I was a bit of a 'lad's lad' with my mates. We'd be going out and getting up to all sorts. I was trying to live two separate lives; I was not sacrificing what I think I deserved in terms of just first year out of school and seeing what all my mates are doing.

"The routine would have been go to training and then go over to my mates' gaff after. Whereas, deeper into your career, you go to training, you go to your recovery after, you go home to your girlfriend.

"It's just completely different situations you're getting involved in. In my head, I'm getting good results so I keep doing what I'm doing.

"The really key part for me was moving. If I stayed in Leinster, I would have tipped away there for another while, probably signed another contract and been a squad player.

"If I was done, I was done. I might have gone and played somewhere else . . . I needed to grow up in myself. That was on me.

"You can look at it and think, 'Ah, I'm hanging around with the wrong people'. No, it's on you.

"Moving away was huge. Even that first year I'm still doing things I shouldn't be doing in terms of drinking or whatever. There's nothing wrong with that at that age, but not in excess; every weekend heading out and tearing the arse off it.

"It took me that full year to find myself and grow up. I was only 21, 22, still young. When you're young and you've got expectations on you and you have expectations on yourself, it just does funny things to you.

"It was definitely hard, but thankfully I was able to steer it back on course.

"And once I did that, those experiences actually really stood to me. If it doesn't break you, hopefully it makes you in many ways."



“ Moving away was huge. Even that first year I’m still doing things I shouldn’t be doing in terms of drinking or whatever. ”

Moving was a big step, Liz's decision to join him and set up home was another. The arrival of Rassie Erasmus was another moment that helped Conway move in the right direction.

Anthony Foley had recruited Conway and stood by him when things were going badly, and it was in the months after his tragic passing that the winger began to find the rhythm and momentum his career needed.

Despite having to manage an elbow injury, he became a regular in Munster's European side and by the end of the Six Nations he'd made his Ireland debut.

He began to feel at home when he played a leading role in the big win over South Africa that autumn, ironically the moment that inspired Erasmus's return home.

Conway was one of Ireland's best players at the 2019 World Cup and was part of the team that beat New Zealand in 2021 but injury robbed him of a place in the 2018 and 2023 Grand Slams.

In Munster, he threw himself into the cause but had to watch from afar when they finally lifted the URC title in Cape Town. He'd played once in that campaign, scoring a try in his final game of professional rugby against the Sharks.

His try against Toulon in the 2018 Champions Cup quarter-final is the moment that people bring up when they meet him, a score that encapsulated the explosive power, pace and determination all rolled into one.

Being a rugby player was his identity, but one day he went into a consultation and by the end of the conversation it was over. The knee cartilage damage he'd suffered in the 2022 Six Nations just wouldn't come right.

"I was pushing really hard to get back," he recalls. "And it's a double-edged sword. I was wired to train really, really hard, probably since my career started taking an upward trajectory. And it's really hard then to manage that when you're pushing so hard towards something you want.

"In the last 18 months, two years, I'd missed some big moments for Munster and Irish rugby. You build up a tolerance to that disappointment, you almost get used to it.

"That stood to me after. There was a small bit of relief in there as well because every day, going out and training . . . it was really, really taxing."

He retired at a similar stage to Keith Earls who recently spoke about the peace he's found in life after rugby, and while it hasn't all been plain sailing, Conway is similarly content with his lot.

"I've not struggled with the identity piece at all. I don't have a clear answer for you on why, because I know that does hit people hard," he reflects.



“ I wasn’t actively prepared to retire, but those two years maybe did stand me in better stead than if I was taken out – bang. ”

"I wasn't actively prepared to retire, but those two years maybe did stand me in better stead than if I was taken out – bang. I remember Felix Jones playing one week against Glasgow, bad neck injury. Within three weeks, he was retired.

"That's a harder one to take. It's been mostly really good, there is so many other things going on in my life with the kids, planning to move back to Dublin . . . I'm excited about the next stage of what I'm going to do professionally for the next medium term, or 10/15 years.

"There was some really tough days in there too though, I won't lie."

Paul O'Connell and Jerry Flannery had warned him about the six-month mark being the hardest.

"I remember really clearly driving with my wife in UL, really close to the six-month mark, and I was asking her, 'do you reckon it's going to get tough?'. I was like: 'I don't think I've ever been in a better mental space here,'" he recalls.

"May came and I couldn't understand why I was not able to see things how I'd seen things a week earlier.

"It was really hard for pretty much the month of May. I was tough at home. We had Caelan at the end of March and in my head, naively, I put a hard date of May to get back on the horse from a professional standpoint.

"I didn't have a clear understanding of what moving forward looked like. That took a bit of time to figure out. Thankfully, that really tough spot was only the month of May."

Now, he's about to forge a new path.

"It's going to revolve around working with the lead athletes, working with high-performing professionals, I'm going to lean on the mental preparation and the mental skills that I've acquired over 13, 14 years," he explains of the business he'll launch in the New Year.

"I had a pretty diverse experience within the game. I am doing a course as well in UL, a doctorate in human performance and innovation, I'm trying to put a bit more education around it as well as my own experience.

"I sit down with you and talk about that side of things, human performance, whether it's in relation to sport or personal or business and how you can leverage different mental skills in particular situations to move forward.

"You see it so much when athletes are interviewed in most sports and they're asked about what's the split? Is it 50 per cent physical, 50 per cent mental or what? And more often than not, the answer is that it comes back more mental than physical."

They say sports people die twice, but this is essentially Andrew Conway's third act. He's been the schools star, later the respected professional, and as he makes the return journey back from Limerick he's ready to channel all those experiences into his new life.

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BRAIN HEALTH SERVICE

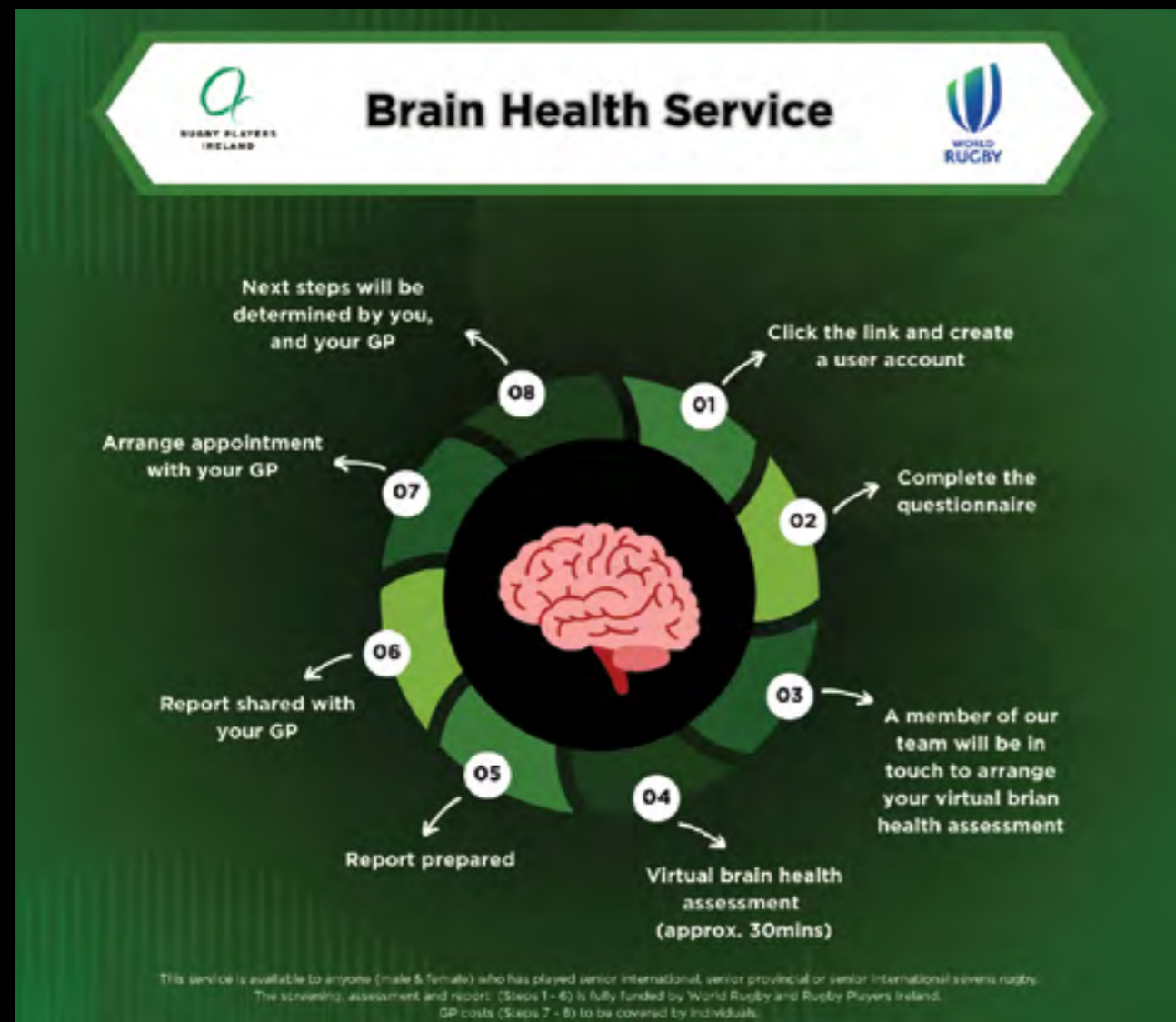
Together with World Rugby, Rugby Players Ireland have launched a new Brain Health Service to support former elite players who have concerns about their brain health. Since followed by Australia, Ireland was the first country in the world to launch the new initiative which is available to any retired 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 through Beyond the Game. 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.

For further information, please email brainhealth@rugbyplayersireland.ie



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LOCKED IN

Former Connacht Rugby stalwart returns as PDM

RONAN LOUGHNEY



The opportunity to contribute positively to the player environment in Connacht Rugby was very appealing. I have a great appreciation for what Rugby Players Ireland (RPI) did for me whilst I was playing rugby and in particular the support I received from Deirdre Lyons. I saw at first-hand the amount of amazing work Deirdre did to create an accepted culture of self-development within the player group.

While I appreciate that I have big shoes to fill, the Player Development Manager role stood out to me because I am very aware of the impact a person in that position can have. From my own playing days I know how stressful and intense the professional rugby environment can be.

I am very excited about the role I can play in Connacht Rugby's future and in building on Deirdre's legacy. It's actually a very exciting time at Dexcom all-round. While the office set-up is makeshift at the moment, the construction work taking place around us represents the great optimism for Connacht's future.

It's hard to believe it's been seven years since I retired. Although Dexcom is undergoing a massive facelift, it was reassuring to find that many of the great people I encountered over the years are still involved with Connacht. We always felt very lucky to have such a passionate community surround the team.



I think that says a lot about Connacht Rugby. The people involved in this organisation care a lot about their players. I was therefore delighted to see the enhanced value and importance that they place on the role of the PDM in assisting them. I have no doubt that this is down to all that Deirdre achieved.

When I first came into the PDM position, the season was already in full flow and so there wasn't much of a honeymoon period. There has been a lot of information I've had to take on board and plenty of upskilling to do. Thankfully I've had great support from all of my colleagues which has also enabled me to enjoy the challenge and experience so far.

One of the most interesting aspects is that six of my former teammates are in the current crop. Even though I have a formal role in the club now, it's been good to get back and catch up with them. I'd like to think there is a mutual respect there from our time spent playing together that we can all benefit from. They have all been very welcoming so far anyway, and more importantly they have been keen to engage and learn.





I'd like to think I'm a good example to players because my transition experience is a little bit off the beaten track. When I retired from rugby, I set up my own business called RO-Design. I built bespoke furniture and did some commercial fitouts for clients. Whilst it was hugely challenging it was also a very rewarding experience. As the years went on I gravitated towards project management roles. I spent the past year setting up a retrofit company for someone who I had previously completed a project for. I have also enjoyed working with TG4 and RTÉ as both a commentator and pundit.

As you can see, I have quite a few strings to my bow and I felt that I could bring a lot of value to what RPI set out to achieve in the personal development space. I'd like to think that my insights might benefit the type of player who has no interest in pursuing a career in academia or in corporate Ireland.

That's not to say I had it all figured out. In fact, I found the transition far from easy. Physically, I knew I was ready to finish because my body was telling



“ I'd like to think I'm a good example to players because my transition experience is a little bit off the beaten track. ”

me so. However, moving from professional sport to self-employment was much more challenging than I had anticipated.

Without realising it, I had become accustomed to a very structured lifestyle. As a sportsman, I had a clear roadmap to achievement. As a start-up, I quickly realised that, firstly, any sense of a structured way of living had to go out the window. Secondly, I hadn't developed a clear enough vision of what success looked like when I was setting off. Above all, I was suddenly out on my own and for someone who had been part of a team for much of his life, that natural support structure I used to rely on was badly missed.

While retirement for any player will be challenging, it's my job to mitigate against that sense of loss. Although the sport has moved on, I've found that the challenges current players face haven't changed drastically since I was playing. For instance, managing further education, training or career development along with a high-performing rugby career remains a delicate balance.

Frustratingly, there are a limited amount of opportunities for off-field development that sit easily within a professional rugby programme. While the provinces are far more understanding of its importance, the logistical difficulties involved tend to give too many players an easy-out. I hope to help them understand that personal development can have a highly positive impact on their environment, on and off the pitch.

It's all part of the challenge, one I'm hugely excited for.

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