



IRISH RUGBY FOOTBALL UNION
ANNUAL REPORT
2021 / 22





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All Standing Committee Meetings may be attended by the President, Management Committee Chairman and Chairman Designate



PRESIDENT'S REPORT



Des Kavanagh

I am delighted to commence my Report by noting how we have emerged from the constraints caused by Covid-19 and are looking forward to ongoing and increasing normalisation of our lives and of our rugby activities. We remain conscious that the pandemic remains rampant in some

parts of the world and concerned that a new variant remains a threat. However, the Government's good management of the disease and the community's commitment to vaccination has allowed us all to live again in hope and confidence.

As I come to the end of my extended term as President, I am greatly confident for the future of Irish Rugby both for our men's and women's game. In the men's game we have the structures in place to continue producing high quality young players in our Schools and Clubs. Our U20s won the Grand Slam this year and our Schools and U19 sides have recorded big wins in recent international tournaments.

Our Provinces are continuing to produce young professionals who seem destined for big careers in the game. It has been great to see all four provinces qualify for the knock out stages of the European Heineken Cup with Leinster advancing to the final, where they lost to La Rochelle in a highly entertaining game.

Our women's game experienced a difficult and challenging end to 2021. The squad is now in transition with a new management team and new players. Their recent Six Nations Campaign demonstrated the many talents in the squad who will be further developed and nurtured in the years ahead.

Equally importantly the base that is Mini Girls rugby and Girls Youth rugby is continuing to develop and expand. School Girls Rugby is now developing in three of our Provinces. The numbers of girls being attracted to the game continues to grow. This is very reassuring as we build towards the future. I have had the great pleasure of attending several high-quality Girls Rugby Finals this season.

I was delighted to see the Ireland U18 Girls team play their first ever international matches in the recent Edinburgh tournament in which they played extremely well in their games against England and Wales. I think the future is very bright.

I want to congratulate the 7's Teams on their successes over the past year. It was great to see our Men's Sevens qualify for the Olympics and appear in their first World Series Final in Toulouse, where they earned a silver medal, while our Women's Sevens finished the World Series in 4th place following the achievement of getting to the Final in Seville, where they also picked up a silver medal.

The IRFU is a very broad-based organisation with diverse responsibilities spread across many sections under the direction of the executive staff and Committee Chairs and Members. I would like to thank all of those who contribute to the success of the organisation across the many areas of responsibility including those who chair and populate the many sub-committees.

The IRFU Rugby Department did a great job during the Covid lockdown by ensuring connectivity for all in the rugby family and in developing educational Webinars aimed at the development of Coaches, Referees and players. These have been a great success.

Patrick Kennedy has done a great job since his appointment as Treasurer and with his and the work of all those on the Finance Committee we are in very safe hands. I would also like to thank those external committee members and others who so willingly provide their expertise to the Union.

The Spirit Committee fulfils a unique role in the IRFU with diverse responsibilities ranging across Safeguarding, Anti-Doping, Inclusion and Diversity, Leadership, and Health and Wellbeing, etc. I am particularly conscious of all the work that has been ongoing in recent years in Leadership and Women in Rugby Leadership roles in particular. This past season approximately 20 women who have completed the Leadership Programme have been in a mentoring programme with Senior Rugby Leaders and Administrators. This important work seeks to enhance the development of more of women in leadership roles in Irish Rugby. I thank the Spirit Committee for all its work.

The IRFU is committed to the furtherance of women in sport. From 2022/23 each province must nominate a minimum of one female representative to the IRFU Committee from the four delegates they put forward. This is an important step forward. The IRFU wishes to promote women to our senior committees, and we look forward to a more diverse organisation as we invite females to join us at every level of our game.

I have been delighted to attend several meetings of the Commercial and Marketing Committee over the last two seasons and I have been hugely impressed by the energy, innovation, and creativity of all involved. The Committee is populated by highly dynamic members, each bringing their own unique skills to their areas of responsibility. I thank you all.

The Review of the Union's Governance Structures has been ongoing for some time. Significant changes have already been made. I would like to acknowledge the great work being done in this area by the members of that committee.

The Professional Game is the engine of the organisation and I want to thank the NPGB for all their work in managing an area which is not just challenging but is one that every supporter has their own particular opinion on. The success of our national teams reflects very positively on the work of the NPGB and on the work of the High-Performance Director.

The Men's team had a very good Guinness Six Nations, winning the Triple Crown and just losing out on a Grand Slam having lost narrowly to France in Paris. Congratulations to Andy Farrell and his management team who have developed a very successful game plan which is so exciting to watch. After beating the All Blacks again in the Autumn Series, at the time of writing, we are all looking forward to the challenge of the New Zealand tour in the summer not just for the Tests against the All Blacks but the games against the Māori's which will provide opportunities for emerging talented players to put their hands up for selection for the full international side.

The financial challenges caused by Covid-19 presented a real threat to the future viability of the professional game and the future survival of many clubs. Thankfully the Government came to our aid when providing €36 million over two years. This money combined with a Redundancy programme enabled our survival and that of the provinces. The assistance provided by Government enabled us to support our clubs and who in turn were able to return to normal club activities when the Regulations were eased and lifted. Our Ulster Clubs were supported by funding from Sport NI in 2020 for which we are very grateful.

Watching provincial and international games on TV in empty stadia was, on the one hand difficult but on the other hand contributed greatly to the mental health of all rugby supporters who adapted to the new normal and tuned in, in great numbers to watch the games.

Great credit is due to the players, coaching staff, medical and their support staff for their management of the so-called 'bubbles' in which the players operated, and which allowed for games to be played.

January 1st, 2022, saw the end of one era and the commencement of another. Philip Browne retired as CEO on 31st December 2021 and handed over the reins to Kevin Potts, who had come through a very exacting and demanding recruitment process. Philip's contribution to Irish Rugby was incredible and this was recognised by all stakeholders in the run-up to his retirement. Philip was also greatly respected internationally, and this was reflected in the many messages of goodwill sent to Philip and the IRFU by colleagues throughout the world.

We are just a few months into Kevin Potts' time as CEO, but we have seen enough already to be confident that he will provide leadership of the IRFU with the highest standards of integrity and probity and that he will bring his own unique stamp to the role.

In conclusion I want to thank my fellow Officers and the members of the IRFU Committee for their support over the past two seasons. Special thanks to those staff with whom I have worked closely, and, on whose guidance, I depended, including Louise, Ellen, Eugenie, and Jean.

Finally, thanks to my wife Marie who has been a great support and an excellent ambassador for Irish Rugby in our interaction with international colleagues and with the many dignitaries with whom we have engaged over this past season.

Thanks also to President Michael D. Higgins who has been a regular attender and great supporter of our teams.

CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S REPORT



Kevin Potts

It is with a sense of great anticipation for the future that I write this, my first annual report as CEO. My predecessor, Philip Browne, retired at the end of December 2021 and I would like, firstly, to thank Philip for steering Irish Rugby through so many challenges and opportunities over the last 30 years. Philip's service and dedication to Irish Rugby cannot be over-stated. On behalf of everyone in Irish Rugby, I thank Philip again and wish him well in his retirement.

For my part, I have held various roles in the Union since I joined in 2005; from Domestic Rugby Manager to Director of Operations, Chief Operating Officer and now, Chief Executive. Being appointed CEO is a great honour for me and one that will demand, and be given, my total commitment.

As a former player I have a deep connection to the game through membership of St. Mary's RFC for more than 35 years, during which time I had the honour of representing St. Mary's RFC, Leinster and Ireland 'A'.

Rugby values, and the ongoing progress and wellbeing of Irish Rugby at all levels, in all formats, will underpin my approach to this role. My ambitions for Irish rugby, in line with that of the Union Committee, are extensive, ranging from the club game through to the highest echelons of World Rugby, with 'Rugby First' underpinning all.

Putting rugby first means having competitive provincial and national teams, while focussing on the health and welfare of our players. It also means that we create a closer connection between the IRFU, Provinces and Clubs. To future-proof rugby in Ireland, we have to extend the reach and appeal of the game to reflect the changing demographics of Irish society, and we have to encourage more women into our sport – on and off the pitch. Lastly, rugby first is about all participants having

fun; whatever our connection with the game, it is important that it is an enjoyable and welcoming environment, where we support each other to be our best selves.

In the pages that follow we look in detail at the current state of the game in Ireland, but before that, I wish to update you on a few key areas of my focus since I have taken on the role of CEO.

WOMEN'S GAME DEVELOPMENT

One of the first areas that I focused on when I became CEO in January was our women's game, which was undergoing an independent review, following the failure to qualify for Rugby World Cup 2021 (being played in 2022). The review took place at a time where important stakeholders had expressed their concern about the implications of not qualifying for the Rugby World Cup, and the on-going development of the women's game.

Undertaken over a five-month period, all recommendations of the review, were accepted, approved by the Union Committee, and published on our website, with our commitment to implementing them. I am pleased to say this work is ongoing. In addition, a wider review into our women's game is being undertaken. This latter review, which is due for completion later this summer, will result in a series of further recommendations which I am confident will inform a new long-term strategic plan that will deliver a sustainable and successful future for Women's Rugby in Ireland at all levels.

For me, and the Union, women's rugby is one of the most exciting areas of growth potential in our game and we are committed to driving the women's game forward. It will take time and investment, and no doubt there will be many challenges along the way, but we are determined to continuously improve our women's game.

EMERGING FROM COVID-19

We have faced an incredibly challenging two years with everything that the Covid pandemic threw at us as a society, and I want to thank everyone involved in Irish Rugby for the commitment, resilience, sacrifices, and flexibility shown to help steer our sport through this period of such uncertainty. It has not been easy.

Despite these challenges, we have also enjoyed some successes.

It was an outstanding achievement for all involved to deliver the successful completion of a full domestic season for the first time since the pandemic, which culminated in exciting Energia AIL men's and women's finals between Clontarf and Terenure, and Railway Union and Blackrock, respectively. It was a delight to witness the commitment, standard, support, and atmosphere at both finals, with each a powerful testament to the quality and appeal of our Club game.


Tasting victory over the All Blacks at home, yet again, and winning a Triple Crown on home soil, winning an U20 Grand Slam, medal-winning Women's 7s performances in Seville and Langford, a first appearance by our Men's 7s in the Tokyo Olympics, followed up by a silver medal in the Toulouse 7s are successes of which all can be extremely proud.

It is important that I acknowledge the generous support Irish rugby received from Government during Covid. Grants of more than €36m were provided to keep the IRFU, provinces and our clubs afloat during the crisis. Without this support, and other assistance such as the wage subsidy schemes and debt warehousing, Irish rugby would be in a very different place. We should never forget this support.

GLOBAL SEASON

We are working with World Rugby, our Six Nations partners and SANZAAR colleagues, on a potential new competition structure for the global season. While the expectation is that the proposals will bring significant additional revenues into the game for all, a key principle underpinning any final agreement, will be that the Unions within the Six Nations and The Rugby Championship will be no worse off commercially. This is important as the revenues from International Rugby provide the resources to invest in the grassroots of the game and must be protected.

Importantly, the Six Nations and Rugby Championships are unaffected by the proposals which focus on making the July and November fixtures more meaningful, adding a competition structure, a pathway for emerging nations to the top tier competition and greater centralising of commercial and broadcast deals.

We are fortunate to be part of the Six Nations; the strongest annual international rugby tournament in the world, which provides the finances required to support all aspects of our game. While we must continue to prioritise this, we believe there is exciting potential, for all, in developing a more meaningful tournament and matches in the Autumn and Summer windows generating significant excitement for fans and players alike 

Discussions will continue on this critical topic throughout the summer and into the Autumn.

FINANCES

In November our Hon Treasurer, Patrick Kennedy, outlined the financial challenges we experienced over the past few years.

Government Covid funding, for which we are extremely grateful, and CVC investment in URC and Six Nations, have been instrumental in keeping Irish Rugby going throughout the pandemic. However, despite this, the Union has seen the reserves it built up over the last 147 years almost halved in two years.

It has been necessary for us to reduce our cost base by 10%, which regrettably involved some compulsory, as well as voluntary, redundancies. The Branches have also made significant reductions to their cost bases.

There is much rebuilding to be done to our balance sheet over the coming years to ensure that we have a stable and viable financial base for the game into the future.

CONCLUSION

The pages that follow will look in detail at the results across our national teams and our domestic game. I do not propose to repeat that here but suffice to say that while there have been huge highs, as previously mentioned - another win over the All Blacks, the U20s Grand Slam victory, and the success of our 7s teams - there have also been disappointments, such as the failure to qualify for the Women's Rugby World Cup in New Zealand later this year.

Over my time in Irish rugby there is one constant that remains true - Irish Rugby's resilience; we will go again, we will improve, and we will do this together. Rugby delivers great occasions, and our job is to strive to ensure that there are more great days ahead. Despite extraordinary obstacles Irish rugby is in a good place as we emerge from Covid-19 and while challenges remain, I am optimistic in our ability and resilience to overcome them and embrace the opportunities that lie ahead. We look forward to continuing success and progress of our National and Provincial Teams, and our club and schools' game.

I am excited for what comes next and will continue to focus on Ireland's journey to being a truly powerful force in the Rugby World.



MEN'S NATIONAL TEAM

The 2021/22 International season kicked off with the Autumn Nations Series in November where victories were recorded over Japan (60-5), New Zealand (29-20) and Argentina (57-3).

The team opened their 2022 Guinness Six Nations campaign with a (29-7) win over Wales in the Aviva Stadium, their ninth consecutive victory. In Round 2 Ireland lost (30-24) to France in Paris but would go on to record victories over Italy (57-6), England (32-15) and Scotland (26-5) securing the Triple Crown and second place in the Championship behind Grand Slam winners, France.

In the summer of 2022, the squad travels to New Zealand to play three Tests against the All Blacks and two games against the Māori All Blacks.

WOMEN'S NATIONAL TEAM

The Women's Rugby World Cup 2021 qualifying tournament took place in Parma, Italy in September 2021. We failed in our bid for qualification following a loss to Spain (8-7), a win over Italy (7-15) and an agonising injury-time loss to Scotland (18-20).

Two wins were recorded in the November Internationals against USA (20-10) and Japan (15-12).

The team, under new Head Coach, Greg McWilliams, finished fourth in the 2022 TikTok Women's Six Nations which took place in a new window, with wins over Italy (29-8) and Scotland (15-14) and losses to Wales (19-27), France (40-5) and England (69-0).

Following an invitation from World Rugby to assist Japan prepare for the Rugby World Cup, the Ireland Women will travel to Japan this summer to face the Sakura Fifteen in a two-Test Series. The back-to-back matches in August will form part of a summer development programme for Greg McWilliams' young side.

IRELAND AGE-GRADE PROGRAMMES

U20 - SIX NATIONS 2022

The U20s had a busy programme this season following last season's 2021 summer Six Nations. Led by Head Coach, Richie Murphy, and Manager, Tom Kavanagh, the side played three fixtures against Italy (8-15 loss), Leinster development (24-21 loss) and Munster development (13-31 win) prior to the commencement of the 2022 U20 Six Nations. To date the side have had an excellent season culminating in the Six Nations Grand Slam title with victories over Wales (53-5), France (16-17), Italy (39-12), England (27-42) and Scotland (59-5).

The U20s are scheduled to play a series of games during the months of June and July against France, England, South Africa and one other country to be determined based on

results. This has been organised in lieu of a Junior World Championship which will be returning in summer, 2023.

IRELAND U19S V FRANCE U19S - BELFAST AND DUBLIN 2022

Following two years of postponements, the U19s resumed this season with two games against the France U19s. A 27-man squad led by Head Coach, Kieran Hallett, and Managers, Barney McGonigle and Noel McKenna, played on the 11th of April in Queens University Belfast (26-21 win) and the 16th of April in St. Mary's College RFC, Dublin (21-50 loss). These entertaining and competitive games, had a development focus with exposure for all squad members.

U18 SIX NATIONS FESTIVAL - FRANCE 2022

Also, after two years of postponements, the Six Nations U18 Festival resumed this season between the 9th and 17th of April in Marcoussis, Paris. A 26-man squad led by Head Coach, Paul Barr, and Manager, Stephen O'Hara, played three fixtures against their counterparts from France (28-23 loss), Wales (46-26 win) and Italy (40-14 win). The development processes the players and management engaged with during the festival, on and off the field of play, were excellent. Each match provided high quality development opportunities for the squad.

U18 CLUBS - ITALY 2021

The Ireland U18s Clubs side restarted their annual fixture against the Italy U18 on October 30th in Treviso, following a two-year absence. A 24-man squad led by Head Coach, Brendan O'Connor, and Manager, Anthony McKibben, spent a week in camp at The Kings Hospital school in preparation for the fixture. The match itself was held at Treviso's Stadio di Monigo and all players acquitted themselves well on their first exposure to international age-grade (41-10 loss).

U18 CLUB AND SCHOOLS - DUBLIN 2022

Following the termination of the Clubs and Schools annual games against the England Counties XV, this was a season of transition. While we continued to look for international opposition for this side, the team played a Leinster development XV on Friday the 22nd of April (5-41 win). Led by Head Coach, Fiach O'Loughlin, and Manager, Wayne Mitchell, a 24-man squad had spent time in three camps prior to the fixture.

U18 WOMEN XV

The Ireland U18 WXV competed in the inaugural U18 Women's Six Nations Festival in April 2022.

NATIONAL TALENT SQUAD

The (NTS) continues to go from strength to strength under the stewardship of National NTS Talent ID Manager Wayne Mitchell. A total of 69 players spread across NTS levels 1, 2 and 3 continued to be supported by National and Provincial pathway staff to help maximise their potential and development. The full return to rugby has also allowed these players to resume their playing plans and continue with their progression through the elite player pathway.

7s

The Ireland Men's 7s team won the Olympic Qualification Repechage in Monaco (June 2021) and were the first Ireland Rugby 7s team to compete in an Olympics. They went on to finish 10th in Tokyo.

They finished 6th in the 2021 HSBC World Series (two tournament event).

In the current 2022 HSBC World Series, the Men's team are currently 5th in the overall rankings with the LA 7s tournament to take place in August 2022 having finished second in Toulouse following two other top four finishes.

The Ireland Women's 7s team finished the season in 4th place in the 2022 HSBC World Series. In Seville the team had their first ever podium finish taking silver and backed that up with a bronze in Langford.

Both squads will compete in a Rugby Europe tournament in July with the aim of qualifying for the 7s World Cup which takes place in Cape Town (September 2022).

IQ RUGBY

IQ Rugby continues to identify and support Irish qualified athletes who have the potential to play professional rugby in, or for, Ireland.

IQ Rugby players have again contributed to Ireland representative teams this season with Sam Monaghan starting for the national women's XVs, Chay Mullins gaining national honours with both Ireland 20s and the Ireland 7s and a number of other players involved in underage Ireland teams over the Easter period.

IQ Rugby has hosted talent id and development days across the UK during the 2021/22 season and is grateful for the ongoing support of the patrons of the IRFU Scholarship Awards which provides a point of difference for IQ Rugby in an increasingly competitive market.

ANALYTICS DEPARTMENT

This season saw the formation of our IRFU Rugby Data centre, initially managed by John Farrell and now by Alan Walsh, which collects bespoke rugby information from age-grade representative teams through to the senior teams of club and country. The system allows for comparative reporting throughout the system, from U18 onwards, as we strive to identify important trends and metrics as the game evolves. This year will see almost 200 games analysed by Alan and the team, generating more than half a million data-points, which are then cleaned and analysed by IRFU data scientist Andrew Whale.

HIGH PERFORMANCE CENTRE

Despite the challenges faced due to the pandemic, the HPC provided training facilities for all National squads and age grade teams. Furthermore, a number of provincial "A" games and the HPC 7s tournament were held at the facility, highlighting the multi-functional space available to our teams and squads. Over the coming months the high-performance centre will see the Men's XV prepare for their Summer Tour to New Zealand, the Women's XV prepare for their invitational tour to Japan, and the 7s teams prepare for Rugby Europe competitions and the RWC 7s qualification tournament.

RUGBY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

The role of the IRFU Rugby Development Department is changing continually as the game adapts to the new pressures of a post Covid-19 world. The one constant in all aspects of the game is the need for a continuous supply of players, volunteers, parents, teachers, coaches, and referees, to meet the demands of the Irish Rugby ecosystem.

Irish Rugby was in survival mode in 2020/21. In the community, our stated goal was to ensure all our clubs could reopen when public health measures were eased, and this was achieved. It was a credit to clubs and valued volunteers that they found ways to meet the needs of their communities during lockdown when their gates were locked and indeed when they were re-opened! Again, it is important to acknowledge the role of Government support in helping clubs survive the pandemic.

This season has been about recovery rather than survival. We have over 90,000 players registered on our Rugby Connect system. Another 132,000 children were given access to rugby through the Aldi Play Rugby programme in Schools and the Canterbury Give It A Try initiative for girls in clubs.

We have more teams in more clubs and schools than we had four years ago. There are 521 active teams for women and girls alone, which is an all-time high, but there's more we can do to strengthen the numbers playing for those teams and we want more opportunities for girls playing rugby in clubs and schools.

The outlook for rugby in the community for 2022/23 is optimistic with growth figures trending upwards. What drives us now is a positive rugby experience. We want more people playing the game of rugby and the data we have tells us that is happening. If we want new players to stick with it, they must have the right experience from the start. Equally we know that we'll lose players who aren't enjoying themselves.

The Women's Rugby Review that is on-going will help us to continue our work in getting greater alignment and connectivity between the domestic game and high-performance departments.

AGE GRADE AND THIRD LEVEL

This season, over 2,000 participants from 123 clubs participated in the Provincial Aviva Mini Rugby Festivals in Bangor Rugby Club, Old Crescent RFC, DLSP FC, Westport RFC as well as the girls-only event at Cill Dara RFC culminating in the National Festival at Aviva Stadium on Sunday, 22nd of May. Our grassroots sponsor, Aviva, is incredibly supportive of the mini rugby programme and in also encouraging other areas to assist with development of skills through their Safe to Dream programme.

As in previous years, the IRFU supports schools' rugby through the Schools of Ireland Scheme. 82 schools received financial support to operate rugby programmes with approximately 20,000 participants, supported by over 1,200 coaches. This season these schools participated in over 10,000 matches, which was slightly down on pre-Covid seasons but a great recovery, nonetheless.

Over the past few seasons, the IRFU has increased investment into Third Level Rugby and entered partnerships with institutions for the provision of development officers, as well as Funding Agreements with Student Sport Ireland (SSI) and the Irish Universities Rugby Union (IURU). The IRFU works closely with Student Sport Ireland (SSI) to manage men's and women's rugby across third level institutions. Over 25 men's and 17 women's teams participated in the League and Cup competitions which culminated in a five-game finals day hosted at the Institute of Technology Carlow, with the following Divisional Winners: DCU (The Brendan Johnston Cup - Men's Tier 1 Cup), UCC (Men's Tier 2 Cup), MTU (Men's Tier 3 Cup), Dublin City University (Women's Tier 1 Cup) and UCC (Women's Tier 2 Cup).

In addition, there were league wins for TUD (Men's Division 1), Maynooth University/UL (Men's Division 2), UJJ (Men's Division 3), UCD (Women's Division 1), TUD (Women's Division 2). The Women's Student 7s tournament took place on Wednesday March 30th at MU Barnhall RFC. UL won the Cup final 20-15 against Maynooth University, IT Carlow won the Bowl against MTU Cork and TUD won the plate against Dundalk IT.

Throughout the season, the IURU hosted their full suite of competitions. Queen's University won the U20 Conroy Cup in October and backed it up by winning the Maughan-Scally (Junior) Cup in UCD in March; UCD won the Kay Bowen Cup (Women's) in MU Barnhall RFC in February and Dublin University currently hold the Dudley Cup after they defeated UCD and UCC during the course of the season.

On Wednesday May 25th, the Irish Students' Team travelled to Barbezieux where they overcame the French Students (53-10). The game was originally scheduled for February 11th but was rescheduled due to Covid-19. The return match in 2023 will form part of UCC's sesquicentennial celebrations and will be played at the Mardyke.

WOMEN'S RUGBY

The 2021/22 season saw a welcome return to a full calendar of events in the women and girls' game. Although the season still required a certain amount of flexibility, to successfully deliver as many competitions and programmes as we did, was a testament to the work of everyone in the clubs, provinces and in the IRFU.

The Canterbury Give it a Try programme took place in the Summer of 2021. The programme started at the end of July and ran for eight weeks. 84 clubs participated with approximately 1,700 players going through the sessions. The success of this programme has seen a number of clubs introduce girls' rugby to their clubs for the first time and also bolstered numbers for those already in existence.

The Aviva Mini Girls Festival took place at Cill Dara RFC. Approx. 200 girls at U10 and U12 from across the country participated. It was a highlight of the season for the girls getting the opportunity to play girls from other provinces and clubs that they would not normally get the chance to.

The X Rugby 7s programme was also reintroduced with the National finals taking place on April 6th in Terenure College RFC. Qualification days had taken place over the previous months in the four provinces. A total of 16 teams attended the finals day: eight junior and eight senior teams. The Senior Cup final was contested by East Glendalough and Mount St. Michael's with East Glendalough taking the title. In the Junior Cup final Wilson's Hospital were beaten by Dominican College Wicklow. The Senior Plate final was taken home by Sacred Heart Westport who overcame Colaiste Iosagain Portarlinton, while in the Junior Plate final, Enniskillen Royal Grammar took the spoils against Colaiste Mhuire Ballingar.

Both the Senior and U18's Interprovincial series returned in 2022 with both competitions played over three successive weekends. The U18's title was awarded to Leinster who went unbeaten over the series. The Senior title went to Munster who were crowned champions after their final game against Leinster. This year's interprovincial series was televised by TG4 which was a fantastic addition to the competition bringing Women's rugby to many more spectators.

This season also saw an expansion to the Interprovincial 7s programme with each province now fielding 7s teams at U16's as well as U18's.

The Women's All Ireland League got under way in a new format with ten teams now participating. Ballincollig RFC and Wicklow RFC were the new additions to the league. The league ran on a nine-game series before the league split into a Top 4 and Conference 6. The League final was contested by Blackrock College RFC and Railway Union RFC in Energia Park and was broadcast live on TG4, with Railway Union winning the title. The Conference final was contested by Suttonians RFC and Galwegians where Suttonians were the victors.

The season concluded with the All-Ireland Cup Competitions. Railway Union completed the league and Cup double overcoming UL Bohemians, Blackrock College RFC saw off Cooke RFC in the Plate final while Malone RFC won the Shield final against Cavan RFC.

COACH DEVELOPMENT

The 2021/22 season saw coach development undertake a blended approach to the delivery of development and education of coaches throughout Ireland. We saw the return of in-person courses and workshops to redress the balance of the virtual world through the previous seasons. Our coach development staff have been able to utilise the adaptations developed during the previous seasons and blend these approaches to enhance learning opportunities for coaches. Throughout this season we saw the delivery of 57 coaching courses across Ireland to support the education of over 1,300 coaches.

The IRFU continues to evolve the delivery of education to coaches; this season saw further development of Gainline's capabilities as our learning management system with the introduction of awards to recognise coaches' ongoing learning. During this season nearly 2,000 coaches have enrolled onto an IRFU active coach badge with over 300 of those attaining a bronze or silver award.

Over 520 workshops and sessions have been delivered this season, with 6,300 enrolments from coaches across all levels of the game.

7,500 coaches have registered on Rugby Connect providing greater insight into our coaching population and their deployment. Over 900 female coaches have been registered. Support for developing the Women's game and in particular female coaches, has continued this season with programmes continuing nationally and provincially alongside partner programmes with Student Sport Ireland, Sport Ireland, World Rugby, and the International Olympic Committee to further enhance our support of female coaches at all levels of the game.

DOMESTIC REFEREEING

2021/22 saw us return to more normal structures and activity which was welcomed by everyone. While continuing to run with the established educational programme our Referee Development Managers (RDMs) set about making up for lost development time with our domestic referees. A huge amount of credit must go to the RDMs, and everyone involved in the Associations and Societies to achieve so much progress this season. As a result of these efforts, we saw a lot of progress across all levels of refereeing, and this gives a great platform going forward.

Gainline and Hudl continue to be useful tools for referees, evaluators, and coaches. Time will be spent over the off-season to update some material on both platforms to



continue the modernisation of the content. Throughout the 2021/22 season, over 850 evaluations and coaching reports have been completed on Gainline.

We have seen the overall number of referees return close to pre Covid-19 levels but most importantly the active number is higher than ever. However, our requirement for additional referees is ongoing.

Each province has made huge strides to transition our Trainee Referees to full membership before turning their attention to the recruitment of the next group of Trainee Referees in August/September. This is no small task and thanks to all who have played their part in this process.

During the season we saw a number of our domestic referees recognised and rewarded with opportunities both home and abroad with notable credit to Katie Byrne and Padraic Reidy who were selected to represent the IRFU at the girls U18 and boys U18 competitions, respectively. In addition, Eoghan Cross was selected to referee his first U20 Six Nations game, Peter Martin was selected to referee the Rugby Europe Super Club final and Andrew Cole was selected to referee his first Rugby Europe international game.

June 2022 saw the IRFU host the IMART (Mixed Ability World Cup) 2022 in Cork. We were overwhelmed with the positive response from volunteers looking to take part and selected a group of 16 referees representing the four provinces who refereed across all four match days.

HIGH PERFORMANCE MATCH OFFICIALS

Season 2021/22 has been another successful season for Irish Match Officials. While Covid-19 continued to disrupt, it was good to see all competitions get back to a more traditional/planned format. We had strong representation across both URC and EPCR competitions with all High-Performance Referees appointed to fixtures including knock out games.

Selection for World Rugby appointments continues to grow with Andy Brace, Frank Murphy, and Chris Busby all refereeing, and Brian MacNeice appointed as TMO within the November window. Having returned from maternity leave, Joy Neville joined this group with selections for the Men's Six Nations. In addition to these appointments, both Joy and Olly Hodges were selected for games in the Women's Six Nations.

Summer selections will see all four full time match officials involved in games with Frank scheduled to referee his first tier one international, Japan v France.

Supported by members of our National Panel, who give a lot of time to refereeing, the team continues to perform at the highest level on and off the field with selections for the more challenging fixtures on a regular basis.

PARTICIPATION RUGBY

As Ireland emerged from the pandemic, there was never a more important time for an emphasis on physical activity and the values associated with rugby. Irish Rugby helped clubs navigate their way through the many challenges faced during this time and thankfully all of our clubs remained viable entities. The return of the CCRO programme in September 2021 allowed many clubs to re-establish those powerful club – school links.

The CCRO programme has returned to a strong footing and this season will see over 140,000 children participate in rugby programmes facilitated by staff on the ground.

The IRFU Touch Rugby programme, which is proudly sponsored by Lucozade, continues to have a very positive partnership with the Irish Touch Association who lend their expertise to the Touch Rugby Programmes. Touch rugby is played in clubs, schools, and universities.

The IRFU Aldi Play Rugby programme remains a key part of our rugby development pathway. The programme had over 120,000 participants engaged in face-to-face sessions over the course of this season. This programme is driven by the Rugby Department through the provincial staff on the ground and, through their excellent work, the programme is more popular than ever.

Rugby volunteers and staff remain a key part of the development of rugby across Ireland and this has only been exemplified in our clubs' ability to emerge from a pandemic in some cases in stronger positions than before. As we close out our first full season since Covid it is hugely important to recognise these people as the lifeblood of our game.

TECHNOLOGY

Rugby Connect, launched in the 2020/21 season, has almost completed its first full season of registrations and competitions 'post' Covid. For the 2021/22 season we have over 92,500+ active members registered; this includes over 20,000 adult registrations, 22,700 youth players, 22,600 school players, 13,900 mini players, with the rest of the registrations made up of coaches, referees, and non-playing members.

As the system has become more embedded in our provinces, clubs, and schools alike, we are beginning to see richer, more accurate data and more processes being streamlined and moving online.

This season we also integrated the Rugby Connect system with Gainline, our education tool, allowing for deeper analysis into the education completed by club members. The continual addition and reinforcement of using Rugby Connect will see richer data being produced from the system, providing a more accurate snapshot of grassroots Rugby. We will continue to transform manual processes into more streamlined electronic processes, as well as increasing the capabilities and the user friendliness of the Rugby Connect system, while focusing on the accuracy of the data.

ENERGIA ALL IRELAND LEAGUE

The Men's Energia AIL, and the Women's AIL finals resulted in wins for Clontarf in the Men's competition and Railway Union in the Women's. A lot of work went into organising the AIL and WAIL and constructive Forum meetings were held with the clubs in April and May 2021 to map out what was always going to be a tricky season to navigate. A full 18 game AIL season was planned and extensive pre-season preparation meant all clubs were aware of what changes to regulations and procedures had to be put in place. This resulted in only nine AIL and three WAIL matches being called off due to Covid-19. Clubs displayed a willingness to play, and all clubs should be congratulated for the manner in which they approached the season.

Covid-19-affected games meant a change to the usual promotion and relegation with only one club going up or down from each division and one gaining promotion from Junior Rugby. This change saw two Round Robin semi-finals and a cracking final played between two famous clubs in Instonians FC and Bective Rangers FC with Instonians coming out the victors 25-21 on 9th April. They will play AIL rugby next season.

The Women's AIL saw the ten teams play each other once in the first half of the season. Recognising an opportunity to work with the new Women's National XVs Team Head Coach, Greg McWilliams, the second half of the season was amended in December to cater for and recognise the needs of the top Irish players. This saw a change in the WAIL schedule where the Top 4 clubs played five matches and the top two then contesting the WAIL final in Energia Park on Saturday 26th February. Railway Union RFC ran out the winners in the first televised WAIL finals beating Blackrock RFC 24-18. Railway Union won the double by winning the AIL Cup beating UL Bohemian 51-12 where the Bateman Cup was won by Lansdowne FC beating Young Munster RFC in Musgrave Park 46-13.

Planning for next season is in hand with the positive and successful AIL and WAIL Forums held in May. These are a vital part of the communication process between the IRFU and the 60 AIL Clubs and see positive contributions from all concerned as we look forward to season 2022/23.

SPIRIT

The Spirit of Rugby programme continues to promote and protect the values of Irish Rugby within clubs and related organisations, through the provision of support and training to players, coaches, and volunteers; albeit with significant work completed by virtual means this season. However, this has meant an increase in audience participation, a wider reach of information and resources, and growing numbers engaging in Spirit projects.

SAFEGUARDING

The safeguarding programme continued a pace with clubs starting the season updating their risk assessments and publishing their Child Safeguarding Statements in line with updated IRFU policies. In addition, the season saw 198 clubs partaking in a Sport Ireland online club audit. Spirit Officers worked with Club Welfare Officers to complete vetting and training of coaches, with over 3,000 vettings and 1,082 coaches completing safeguarding in rugby training, a new course created in September that combines online training with classroom sessions. A further 33 volunteers completed the 'one good coach' module in conjunction with Jigsaw, the National Centre for Youth Mental Health in Ireland.

The IRFU Youth Council conducted a survey in August on the impact of Covid on youth participation, and created a new Youth Volunteer Award in September, that will provide 16 to 24-year-olds with a chance to learn how to carry out a range of roles in rugby, as well as be recognised for the volunteer work within schools and clubs. In April, the Youth Council in conjunction with Leinster Rugby, completed a consultation with players of school-leaving age in order to provide clubs with information on how to retain these players at senior level.

ANTI-DOPING

Covid-19 continued to affect the number of tests that could be completed with reduced fixtures on the calendar, however, testing by both Sport Ireland and World Rugby continued throughout the season, with 216 tests completed. 28 anti-doping workshops were held with over 800 players and related staff. 17 workshops were held for age-grade players across national and provincial squads, with an additional 11 for adult squads.

DISABILITY AND INCLUSION

The tag programme for players with an intellectual disability is now available in 33 clubs across the four provinces with a series of blitzes hosted by participating clubs. Seven Clubs are involved in 'mixed-ability' rugby, contact rugby for adults with and without disabilities. In conjunction with Vision Sport Ireland a pilot project was completed, training 13 coaches and catering for 20 players with vision impairment.

A coaching conference was held for 50 coaches in the High-Performance Centre in May and included an exhibition game and referees' workshop for volunteers taking part in the IMART Tournament hosted by Sunday's Well, Cork in June. A new Disability Inclusion course for coaches was created with 172 coaches taking part in both online and pitch-based sessions as part of the course. In addition, a new 'Diversity and Inclusion' course was launched in March and a range of web-based resources were created for clubs.

21 clubs took part in a walking project, Get Ireland Walking, in conjunction with Sport Ireland and five other NGBs. The aim was to encourage physical activity not only by members but locals living in the area, making rugby clubs more inclusive to non-playing members of the local community.

LEADERSHIP

Four pilot projects were trialled throughout the season, three of them with a specific focus on female volunteers. 82 volunteers were involved, including a group of 20 national and provincial officials who led on the President's Mentoring Awards. The final session was concluded on 15th May and was followed with an evaluation by Ulster University. On completion of the review a volunteer pathway with a suite of leadership training options will be in place for 2022/23 season.

COMMERCIAL AND MARKETING

The Commercial and Marketing function of the IRFU has had a very busy and successful season.

With the return of crowds to International Test fixtures, the Men's National Team hosted Japan, New Zealand and Argentina in November in what proved to be an exciting Autumn Nation Series. The demand for tickets and the support for the Men's National Team demonstrate forcefully just how strong Irish Rugby remains in the National consciousness.

Viewership figures for our Autumn Nations Series, for our Triple Crown winning Guinness Six Nations 2022, and for both the women's and men's competitions, have remained very strong and in most cases have increased. We thank all of our broadcast partners for their continued support.

As a not-for-profit National Sports Governing body, the IRFU cannot deliver our rugby programmes without our partners. We have often said our unique selling point as an organisation is that we see our sponsors as an integral part of our family, and we have worked extremely hard with them to find ways of dealing with the challenges that have been presented for mutual partner benefit. Again, we thank all our partners most sincerely.

As always, we would like to acknowledge the contribution of Vodafone CEO Anne O'Leary and her team for their continued support and promotion of our game. Canterbury have also continued to provide financial support and exceptional kit for our teams, and we are delighted that the Canterbury 'Give It A Try' grassroots girls rugby programme aimed at recruiting more girls ages 8-14 into the game goes from strength to strength.

We also thank Diageo, our official beer partner and title sponsor of the Guinness Six Nations.

We are delighted that Aon have re-signed as title sponsors of our Women's National Team for another 4 years. We collectively have great plans to grow the popularity of the women's game.

This season TikTok came on board as the first official title sponsor of the Women's Six Nations and the IRFU collaborated very efficiently with them in delivering memorable and exciting content which have added greatly to our 'Nothing Like it' women's rugby promotional campaign.



We congratulate and thank the RDS, Musgrave Park and Munster Rugby, Kingspan Stadium and Ulster Rugby for hosting the women's TikTok Six Nations matches against Wales, Italy and Scotland, respectively, where we enjoyed record crowds.

Many congratulations and thanks to PwC on their continued support to our age grade system especially for the Ireland U20s on their Grand Slam winning season.

It has proven to be a very worthwhile exercise for the IRFU to have international rugby teams playing outside of Dublin thus facilitating fans and supporters to see international rugby in their local grounds.

The Energia-sponsored 'Your Club, Your Country' IRFU Grand Draw has seen over €4.7m raised for the club game over the past seven years and again this past season the draw took place online, raising over €600,000 for the club game.

We thank and congratulate Energia for their support in the club space as this past year we celebrated the 30-year anniversary of the ALL. We were delighted to see Energia shortlisted for Sponsorship of the Year at the Federation of Irish Sport Awards.

We welcome Opel as our official car partner. They have made a substantial and important contribution to the game in Ireland.

Our 7s programme remains a key development pathway and a promotional platform for our sport, and we are delighted to welcome Triton Lake as our new sponsor.

To all of our partners including Aer Lingus, Aldi, Kroll, Lucozade Sport, Dove Men + Care, Eden Park, DHL Express, Gilbert and all our suppliers, we thank you for your continued support as we emerge from these trying times.

Our partners are most effective in amplifying their association with Irish rugby with the help and support of our coaches, managers, and players. We thank Andy Farrell, Greg McWilliams and all the National men's and women's players for their help in delivering our commercial programmes.

COMMUNICATIONS

In another challenging year, with uncertainty on how health guidelines may impact people as we emerged from one lockdown to the next, the Union's communications remained agile in decision-making in relation to messaging on playing and attending games. With 'Full Houses' for the 2022 Six Nations confirmed a matter of weeks before the campaign got underway, the commercial and communications teams worked to provide clear communication and understanding to the over 156,000 supporters that would attend our three home games. This is just one example of our work, in conjunction with the government and Sport Ireland, that

provided positive outcomes for those who love our game, and supported the financial programme required to fund the entire game.

The launch of a bespoke campaign to further promote women's rugby, #NothingLikelt, was unveiled in August ahead of the new season to make our women's content and messaging standout across our platforms, in our stadia and across our programmes and campaigns. Created as a result of feedback from players, coaches, and supporters #NothingLikelt seeks to promote the feeling and emotions people get when involved in our game. In tandem, a fresh and contemporary graphic treatment was created for our men to continue the on-going, and award-winning work of #ShouldertoShoulder, to ensure our strong, and growing social audience continue to engage with our messaging and promotion.

On the domestic front, a focus on our core value of fun across the summer of 2021 and into the start of the 2021/22 season allowed us to showcase and celebrate rugby people and the rugby experience as a way of inviting new and returning members of the rugby community back into their clubs as public health restrictions were eased. A series of case studies were produced to demonstrate the various rugby offerings available to players and encourage clubs to look at new ways to create membership and provide a positive rugby experience.

The 2021/22 season was one of digital transformation for the Energia All-Ireland League with the addition of a new highlights video service. Match highlights were produced for every game in the Energia All-Ireland League Women's Division and Men's Division 1A with select games available in Men's Division 1B. This helped to deliver over 3.6 million video views between September and March on Irish Rugby social channels alone and demonstrate the quality and excitement of our premier club competition to new audiences. Almost 40% of this content focused on the Energia All-Ireland League Women's Division as a key driver of the #NothingLikelt project. The women's division was also supported by a Game of The Week initiative which produced high quality footage of club matches and gave new opportunities to women to share their rugby expertise through commentary, co-commentary, and analysis. The IRFU will continue to provide these opportunities with a view to helping current and former players and coaches develop their on-air skills for radio and television.

The IRFU Communications team also worked closely with broadcast partners in the first ever televised games in the Vodafone Women's Interprovincial Championship and Energia All-Ireland League Women's Division Final. The live broadcasting of marquee domestic rugby events remains a key part of our strategy. Participating clubs were given promotional material on a weekly basis to help them advertise their fixtures on social media.

2021/22 saw the development of more teams across boys and girls from U18s Schools to U19s and U20s summer programmes, across 7s and XV's, all of which were promoted and supported by the Communications Team.

In a busy year our focus also remained on the power of digital and how to best tailor our work as we seek to grow our audiences and support.

We were delighted to have been shortlisted for two Federation of Irish Sports Awards, and to report that our reputation score, detailed in the annual Reprtrak survey of the 100 most respected Irish brands, improved from 26th to 11th.

MEDICAL

Given the ongoing importance of player welfare, we have included in this year's report an extended medical insight into the extensive work that is undertaken by the IRFU in this area.

COVID-19

The 2021/22 season was once again hugely influenced by the Covid-19 pandemic and the restrictions placed on sport both in the High Performance and Domestic games. The second year of the pandemic saw the roll out of vaccinations and the emergence of the more transmissible Omicron variant. Despite the ongoing pandemic all high performance and domestic competitions have been completed.

Over 40,800 Covid-19 PCR tests have been performed across all players and staff operating in the high-performance centres since June 2020, with a positivity rate of 0.9%. There has been no evidence of Covid-19 transmission during match-play. Over the whole duration of the pandemic there have been only two professional matches cancelled due to Irish teams unable to field a team due to Covid-19. This season nine out of a total of 450 men's and three women's All Ireland League games were cancelled due to Covid-19.

RESEARCH AND INNOVATION

Our Innovation and Research is driven by performance health, balancing player welfare with performance goals. Research has considerable potential to enhance performance health. Adopting an approach where projects are initiated to address specific issues (e.g., player injury, environment), enhance current practice (e.g., training prescription, leadership) or identify opportunities for innovation will ensure that research is anchored to performance rather than individual priorities or interests.

In support of innovation, the IRFU medical department have played a leading role in establishing a joint initiative to support Irish Technology. By providing a rugby operational environment to test, trial, and develop their appropriate solution, these successfully selected companies gain access to a commercial stage and the potential to scale globally.

We continue our collaboration with a multi-centre concussion

study supported by the International Olympic Committee (IOC), with one season of data collected and supported by all the medical staff within the provinces as well as the High-Performance Centre.

Our participation in an international consensus on the management of hamstring injuries has been successful, and currently in submission with the British Journal of Sports Medicine. Another five manuscripts are being prepared or in submission with a number of high-ranking journals.

Through our different projects and collaborations, we have raised €35,000 in funding.

The Medical Department represented the IRFU at over 30 national and international conferences, workshops and guest lectures. Notably, our presence at the IOC Prevention of Injury and Illness in Sport Conference held in Monaco was well received by the sporting community.

In collaboration with the Medical Research Lead, a Nutrition Research Group has been set up to identify nutrition-related research projects to support player development and performance.

A funded PhD opportunity to explore nutritional and energetic considerations supporting the health, maturation and athletic development of rugby players, has been secured by the Performance Nutritionist working in the National Talent Development pathway.

The Head of Nutrition co-authored a chapter in the book 'The Dynamics of Modern Rugby', published by Routledge (Taylor & Francis Group) 2021.

IRFU RESEARCH COMMITTEE

The IRFU Research and Education Committee was established in 2018 to provide oversight and governance to research activities involving our players and staff across all levels of the game. To date 52 applications have been reviewed and 36 have been accepted and supported by the IRFU. While the Covid-19 pandemic impacted research activities across all levels of the game, efforts were made to continue conducting high quality innovative research where feasible. Studies the IRFU have engaged with over the last season include a large multi-centre International Olympic Committee (IOC) Concussion study, an investigation into the efficacy of antigen testing, investigation into novel salivary and blood biomarkers in concussion and pelvic health in women's rugby.

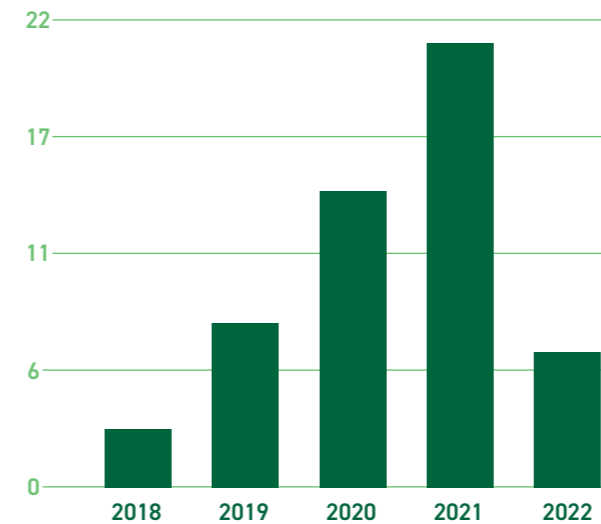


Figure 1: IRFU Research Committee Applications received

INJURY SURVEILLANCE

HIGH PERFORMANCE GAME

We have produced 12 reports on injury surveillance and ongoing player management in the professional game. This included central investigations into the effect of return to rugby post-Covid, and also specific provincial requests that look into performance questions and opportunities, such as the prevalence of a specific injuries.

Importantly, the Professional Rugby Injury and Illness Surveillance Report (2020/21) was made available this year, marking a significant step forward in our ability to accurately document our ongoing injury surveillance in the professional game. Following this report, a live injury surveillance dashboard was created to assist in managing players and provide ongoing overview of injuries.

DOMESTIC GAME

The IRFU Medical Department, in conjunction with the provinces, continues to gather injury data across all levels of the domestic game via an online injury reporting system. The numbers using the online reporting system in the 2021/22 season are in line with previous years, indicating continued compliance. The IRFU Medical Department continues to work closely with the Refereeing Department, to monitor instances of suspected/confirmed concussions across the All Ireland League (AIL) via an online reporting system.

IRISH RUGBY INJURY SURVEILLANCE (IRIS) PROJECT

The Irish Rugby Injury Surveillance (IRIS) Project have published annual season reports in both the domestic men's, women's, and school's game since 2017. The domestic game suffered major disruption during the Covid-19 pandemic, which resulted in little domestic rugby being played. As such, no IRIS Season Report is available for the 2020/21 season. However, the IRIS Research Team in the University of Limerick approached the 2021/22 season with renewed focus and will look to publish the latest findings from 22 men's and women's senior clubs in Summer 2022.

The IRFU have renewed their support of the IRIS Project, through to 2030 which will see three additional PhD researchers join the IRIS Research Team. This second phase of the IRIS Project will see expansion across both the boys' and girls' schools game, investigation of mental health and injury burden and further development of evidence-based injury prevention strategies.

In addition to the annual reports, the IRIS research team have published 15 papers in internationally-renowned academic journals and have presented at 31 conferences, both nationally and internationally.

PLAYER WELFARE

SAFE RUGBY PROGRAMME

The SAFE Rugby – Standard Approach to Field Emergencies in Rugby – programme aims to provide rugby specific, pitch side emergency care training and skills to medical staff and non-medical individuals involved at all levels in Irish rugby across all four provinces.

In the 2021/22 season, despite ongoing restrictions with Covid-19 and having to postpone or cancel 12 courses, 46 courses were run across all three levels, with an attendance of 762. This season saw another increase in the number of health professionals seeking places on our Level 2 course. We ran ten courses at this level and expect to see the demand increase for this level of professional pitch side care training over the coming seasons.

ENGAGE – IRFU RUGBY READINESS PROGRAMME

The IRFU Rugby Readiness and Robustness programme, ENGAGE, was launched in September 2021. ENGAGE is an integrated and structured warm-up programme aimed at enhancing rugby performance and reducing the risk of injury. This resource supports all levels of the club and school game. The programme has been informed by the IRIS Project and the IRIS Research Team are currently investigating the programme's effectiveness across the club game.

The rollout of ENGAGE involved virtual training sessions for coaches across all the provinces, free access to video resources, online education modules and wallet cards.

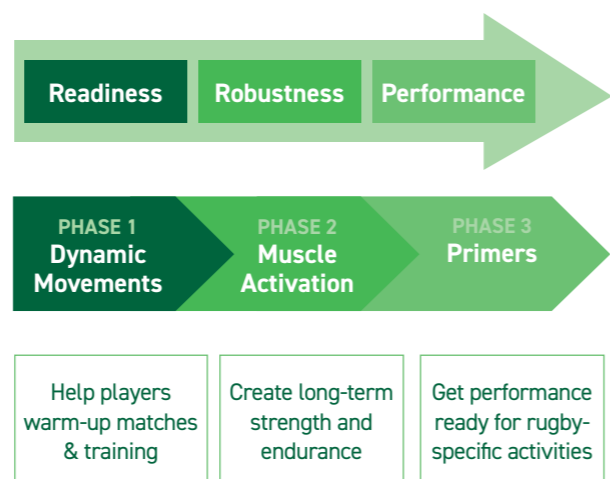


Figure 2: ENGAGE phases

EDUCATION AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

PERFORMANCE SUPPORT PROGRAMME

The Performance Support Programme is designed to coordinate the development and delivery of an integrated model that effectively supports performance across the IRFU High Performance system. The model (Figure 3.) centres around three key themes: Connect, Deliver and Excel. Key priorities identified for the next year include enhancing connection and integration across all service disciplines, identification and sharing of examples of best practice, establishing, and embedding an interdisciplinary performance planning process as well as working with coaching to support the cultivation of a high-performance environment.

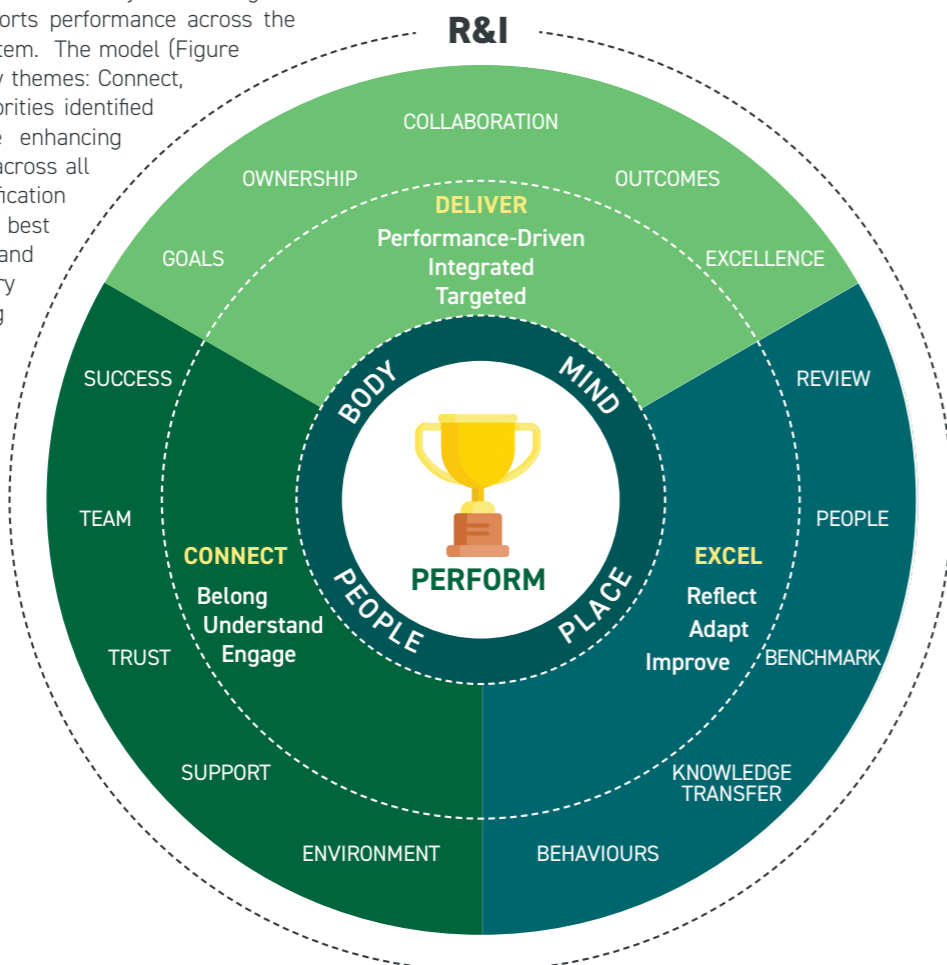


Figure 3

EDUCATION

This season a monthly lecture series was established for the high-performance medical staff, with international speakers from highly successful sporting backgrounds speaking each month. A 'Young Player Series' was also started for academy and pathway staff, focusing on the medical needs of younger players, and developing the skills and knowledge of the staff working with them.

GAINLINE

The IRFU Medical Department is committed to upskilling and supporting those providing medical assistance across all levels of the game. Gainline is an interactive online educational hub that the medical department has used successfully to support learning for the high-performance medical staff. It allows for interactive continued learning that can be tracked by the system moderators. A section on Gainline is dedicated to medics working across the domestic game to help upskill and stay connected.

In addition, Gainline has been used to roll out targeted player education on concussion with modules specific to high-performance players (HIA), NTS players and school players. Gainline also continues to house nutrition modules for NTS players that must be completed as part of the minimum nutrition standards. An online nutrition education resource has also been developed for the Referees on the IRFU High Performance Referee Panel.

CONCUSSION AND LONG-TERM BRAIN HEALTH

The Long-Term Brain health working group was set up and terms of reference established. Output to date from this project includes:

- Interviews with eight world leaders in clinical management of concussion and associated research
- A review of the IRFU's current acute management of concussion
- Enrolment of 15 clinical staff in additional training in the ImPACT system (computerised neurocognitive testing)
- The introduction of the IOC Mental Health Screening tool (SMHAT1) across the high-performance game
- A review and update of the IRFU Entry and Exit medicals to include areas specific to brain health
- Developed links with research teams internationally and in Ireland
- A review on the role of nutrition in acute and long-term brain health in rugby players
- Development of in-career medical review process including increased monitoring of cardiovascular health
- An attitudes and knowledge of concussion survey was carried out with the national Women's XV squad and the U20s.



STAFFING

The IRFU medical team will expand this year with the addition of a Performance Psychologist to the team (currently at recruitment stage). The Women's XV team also has a full time Physiotherapist coming on board.

In mid-2021 the role of Medical Co-ordinator was restructured into two roles: Medical Manager High Performance game and Medical Manager Developmental Game. This is the first time we have had a full-time member of the medical staff focus entirely on the domestic game.

Two Academy part-time nutritionists were made full-time in Leinster and Munster to meet service demands in the Elite Player Pathway.

After 16 years leading the Performance Nutrition team, Ruth Wood Martin has retired from the IRFU. Ruth made a significant contribution to the area of performance nutrition across the high-performance game and built up a team of 11 performance nutritionists across the provincial and national sides.

Two physiotherapy panels have been created to support the high-performance game (7s, women's, underage national teams etc.) and pathway/grassroots game. This helps to ensure the standard of contracted staff was consistently high and met the requirements of the system. These panels have been very successful in providing rapid access to appropriately qualified and experienced physiotherapists when needed. A similar panel was set up for doctors across the high performance and domestic game.

THE HIGH PERFORMANCE CENTRE

The High-Performance Centre (HPC) which opened its doors in September 2019 is now in full swing hosting the Men and Women 7s on a daily basis and has become the main training hub for Men and Women XVs. The modern layout of the building including some open space offices and connecting areas like science and medical, encourages the interaction of different staff promoting healthy discussions under one roof.

The Medical area which includes a separate doctor room with the latest US imaging technology, extends beyond the single massage bed and contains a designated rehab area as well as a recovery zone with 6 Normatecs and a highly popular hydrotherapy suite.

ANTI-DOPING

1ST JUNE 2021 – 31ST MAY 2022

Total number of tests 216

TEAM	IN COMPETITION	OUT OF COMPETITION
Mens (15)	09	23
Provincial (including Academy)	29	92
U20s	10	0
Womens (15)	8	0
Womens (7)	8	0
Mens (7)	22	7
AIL	4	0
Age-grade	4	0
TOTAL	94	122

NOTE:

- Figures are for number of tests, carried out between 1st June 2021 – 31st May 2022 - not comparable with 20-21 season (which was a 9-month recording period).
- Covid impacted the number of tests carried out:
 - Restricted space in anti-doping control area
 - Reduced training camps for age-grade players
 - Limited schedule for U20 men and 7s men and women
 - User Pays tests were reduced to align with reduced capacity to pay for testing

CHARITABLE TRUST

The Trust supports 36 seriously injured players throughout Ireland and for each there is a liaison person who keeps in touch in order to identify each player's needs. This continued without break throughout the pandemic. In the past 12 months approximately €280,000 was spent on various aspects of their lives from home improvement to Christmas hampers.

During the year three further retrospective injuries came to our attention which we had to examine. This emphasises the importance of rigorous reporting of injury.

The period of the pandemic challenged our ability to raise the funds necessary for supporting our injured players. Fortunately, the Union continues to support the Trust with an Annual Grant and our main Sponsors stuck with us throughout. Our fundraising group never ceased in their



efforts to generate the necessary income and their initiatives include the Friends, The Aon Lunch, and the Vodafone Rugby Ball, two Pinergy Golf Outings and more.

Our two research projects have also faced challenges during the pandemic particularly our project with Leinster Schools, though this continues to develop despite the lack of schoolboy rugby during that period. The Spinal Injuries project has seen an increase in the numbers on the research team allowing us to increase the length and breadth of the study.

We are currently in the middle of a governance review which will see major changes in our organisation over the next 12 months.

COMMITTEE

Retiring from the IRFU Committee is Past President (2017/18) Philip Orr. Philip was elected to the IRFU Committee in 2009, was Chair of the Disciplinary Committee, and served as a World Rugby representative. Our thanks and best wishes go to Philip and his wife Anne.

Declan Madden is stepping down as Chair of the IRFU Management Committee having completed seven years in the role. Declan has been a member of the IRFU Committee since 2013, serving as Chair since 2015. The IRFU thank Declan and his family for the time and energy he dedicated to the role. Niall Rynne, who has been Chair "Designate" now becomes Chair of the IRFU Management Committee.

The IRFU also thank Jim Gibson, who is stepping down from the IRFU Committee this year. Jim joined the Committee in 2016, and worked across the Women's Rugby Committee, the Finance Committee and Game Development Committee.

OBITUARIES

- J.R. Kavanagh** Former Ireland Player (1953-1962, 35 Caps)
- K. Flynn** Former Ireland Player (1959-1973, 22 Caps)
- W.S.H. Lavery, LL.B.** Past President (1999-2000)
- T.J. Kiernan** Past President (1988-1989)
Former Ireland Player (1960-73, 54 caps)
Former British and Irish Lions (1962/68, 5 Caps)
Former Ireland National Team Coach (1980-83)

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