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IRISH RUGBY FOOTBALL UNION  
ANNUAL REPORT 2022/23





#RoadToParis2024

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 F. Sweeney (co-opted)  
 P. Dean (co-opted)  
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## International Affairs Committee

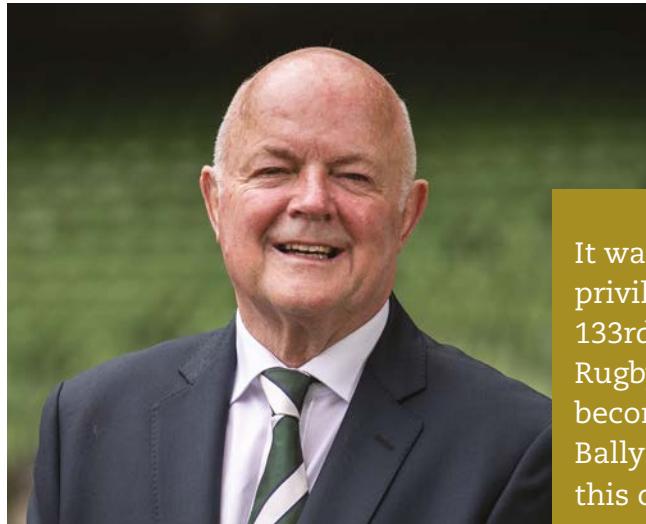
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## Audit and Risk Committee

**T. Horgan** - Chair  
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# President's Report





It was a great honour and privilege to be elected as the 133rd President of the Irish Rugby Football Union last July, becoming the first member of Ballynahinch RFC to hold this office.

## JOHN ROBINSON

As I write this report, I feel I have been privileged to meet and enjoy the company of so many people heavily involved in the sport of rugby football and to be part of and enjoy many great rugby experiences during the year. Of course, like any year in life there have been highs and lows, victories, defeats and disappointment. That is life, but within Irish rugby we have many great people within clubs, schools, the Provinces and the IRFU who learn from these experiences and work hard to constantly make improvements. I would like to thank all these people for all their hard work and dedication to this game which we all love.

The year began with the previous President, Des Kavanagh, laying down a big challenge in respect of the Senior Men's XV which was to better the historic achievement of not only beating the All Blacks but also winning the series on New Zealand soil. A feat we could only dream about and one which will go down in Irish and world sporting history.

The other challenge the world had was whether COVID was at the stage where it would not disrupt life as it did in the previous two years. Thankfully, this challenge has been met by the world's scientists and governments and we have been blessed by life and rugby returning to normality.

The achievements this season by the Senior Men's XV has been nothing short of magnificent with wins in the Autumn against South Africa, the current World Cup holders, Fiji and Australia. Then in the Guinness Six Nations competition Ireland went on to win the Grand Slam, the Triple Crown and of

course the Guinness Six Nations Championship. This is only the fourth time that the Ireland team has achieved a Grand Slam. I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate and thank the team captain, Johnny Sexton, and all the players, Head Coach, Andy Farrell, and members of the coaching team, Team Manager, Mick Kearney, and all the support staff for a wonderful season of top-class, quality rugby which is the envy of many of our rivals. Of course, the team enjoyed the usual tremendous support at the Aviva Stadium and I thank all our supporters for getting right behind the team and I hope that you thoroughly enjoyed the games.

Most rugby fans are now looking forward to the Rugby World Cup in France. It will be the sporting event of 2023 and I know that the whole of the Irish rugby nation will join me in wishing the Ireland team every success in this tremendously challenging tournament. It will also be the final chapter in Johnny Sexton's illustrious career and what a contribution he has given Irish rugby and a legacy he will leave behind.

The Under 20s Men's team mirrored the success of the Senior Men's team by winning their Six Nations tournament with a grand slam and carrying on the great record of success Ireland has enjoyed at this level. This was a tremendous achievement by this group of young men under the captaincy of Gus McCarthy and I congratulate him and his team. I had the opportunity to meet this team and number of their parents and it was a real pleasure. The coaching and management

team under Head Coach Richie Murphy also deserve great credit not only in winning silverware but also developing these young people at a critical time in their rugby journey. Thank you for everything you do. The performance of these young men and the quality of rugby played indicates strongly that the future of the senior men's team is secure. I would also like to thank all the supporters who attended Musgrave Park and who really got behind the team. I wish the Under 20s team well in the World Rugby U20 Championship in South Africa this summer.

Two Grand Slams in the one year is another historic achievement for Irish rugby and this is the first time for Irish rugby this has been achieved.

The Women's XV squad is in a period of tremendous change and is rebuilding. The TikTok Women's Six Nations tournament has been very challenging, playing against teams with

considerably more experience at international level than our team. However, the performance and commitment of all the members of the squad and the staff who support them has been inspiring and the progress that is being made is very evident. I have been proud to meet and spend time with this group of people who are immensely proud to be able to represent Ireland.

There has been considerable work in women's rugby over the past year with the publication of the 'Women in Rugby Report'. I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone involved in the compilation of this report for their input. This report sets out a road map for the future of women's rugby in Ireland to which the IRFU is totally committed and is supporting with greater investment and structure. The large numbers of girls playing the game in clubs throughout Ireland is extremely encouraging and I look forward to a very bright future for women's rugby in Ireland.





The Irish men's and women's sevens teams continue to perform extremely well on the world stage as part of the World Rugby Sevens Series. Both teams have been striving to qualify for the Olympic games to be held in France in 2024 and it was a tremendous achievement for the Women's team to achieve qualification in Toulouse in May. The Men's team is also still in with a great chance to qualify and I wish them every success in the play-off games to be played in Krakow.

Irish rugby has a vibrant age grade structure with teams of boys and girls, at various ages, playing against international competition. A good example of this are the recent successes of the Under 18 girls' and boys' teams. The development and success of these teams is a credit to the boys and girls within the playing squads, the various coaches and support staff involved and the parents who support their children in their rugby journey. I would like to thank everyone involved in age grade rugby for all their hard work and dedication.

We should be rightly proud of our provincial teams within Ireland. All four provinces finished in the top six of the United Rugby Championship.

Munster went on to win a tremendous Grand Final, played against the Stormers in Cape Town, to become league champions. This was a great achievement by the Munster team bringing home their first major trophy in twelve years. Leinster performed extremely well in both the United Rugby Championship and the EPCR Heineken Champions Cup. Having reached the final of the Champions Cup, they were narrowly defeated by a strong La Rochelle side.

Of course, Irish rugby is made up of a vast number of parts. I have had the pleasure this year of attending many events in clubs, colleges, schools, and universities all deeply involved in our sport. I thank you all for your continued support which is greatly valued.

I have had the pleasure of attending several clubs which have celebrated significant anniversaries this year ranging from 50 years to 150 years in existence. All tremendous achievements in these days of rapid change. I have visited many clubs where I have found the grassroots game to be thriving well again after COVID. The numbers playing the game at mini and youth level are tremendous. I have been very impressed by the work that is going on with the new pitches, gyms,

changing rooms and other facilities that are being developed, the number of young people, especially girls, who are now taking part in the sport and the enthusiasm of the people involved who give their time and expertise for the love of the game and the benefits it brings to their communities.

Our sport relies very heavily on volunteers and so the introduction of the IRFU Spirit of Rugby Volunteer Awards this year is very welcome. The work that our volunteers carry out is tremendous and our sport could not function without them. I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone involved for all your magnificent work. I would also like to thank all those clubs I have attended for their very warm welcome.

We often refer to the rugby family and I would like to send my sympathy to all those people within rugby who have lost loved ones during the year. My own family experienced the loss of a family member some years ago, our son Neil, and the support of the rugby family was invaluable.

I would also like to thank the IRFU Charitable Trust for its continuing splendid work. During the year, I had the great pleasure of meeting some of the people the Trust has helped, and it is humbling to see the work that has been carried out.

My thanks go to all those people who supported me during the past year. I would not have been able to perform the duties as President of one of the foremost sporting bodies on this island without them. I would like to pay tribute to the

Chief Executive, Kevin Potts, the Directors and all the staff within the IRFU for their support and assistance. I would like to thank my two Vice Presidents, Greg Barrett and Declan Madden, the Chair of the Management Committee, Niall Rynne, the Treasurer, Patrick Kennedy, and the Immediate Past President Des Kavanagh for their support, hard work, and friendship. To the Union Committee, my thanks for all your support and hard work. I also thank all the other Committees and sub committees for your work which has been invaluable in dealing with the business of the IRFU in a very quickly changing and challenging world.

It has been a great pleasure to carry out this great role and it would not have been possible but for the support of my wife Lynne and my family. Lynne travelled extensively with me and carried out her own busy role with good humour while keeping me on track. Thank you, Lynne, for making the journey possible.

Finally, I know that there are and will be challenges for rugby not only in Ireland but across the world. However, I also believe that by working together within Ireland and with the other rugby nations the future is extremely bright.

Thank you all.





# Chief Executive's Report





It is with a sense of pride that I deliver this year's Annual Report following a season in which the Ireland men's team has solidified its position as Number 1 in the world.

## KEVIN POTTS

This is an extraordinary achievement, fully justified and one in which all connected with Irish rugby, and indeed Irish people at home and abroad, can and do take immense pride.

### Grand Slam Year

We will never forget that magical St. Patrick's weekend in Dublin and Cork, where the men's senior and Under-20 sides lifted their respective Grand Slam titles, a unique double for Irish rugby, setting a phenomenal standard for the generations to come.

To our inspirational Head Coach Andy Farrell and captain Jonathan Sexton together with all the players, management team and support staff – congratulations on your stunning achievements throughout the season.

The international season started last summer with a first series win in New Zealand. Since then, the team maintained their run of excellent form to retain their number one world ranking arising from a series of outstanding results across the Bank of Ireland Nations Series, with victories over South Africa, Fiji, and Australia through to an undefeated Guinness Six Nations Championship.

The atmosphere in the Aviva Stadium, as the Irish and English teams lined up for the anthems, was palpable and the temperature continued to rise as Ireland edged closer to a historic, first-ever Grand Slam victory in Dublin. The scenes of uncontrolled joy will remain long in the memory

of all who witnessed them that day. It was indeed a unique and wonderful occasion for Irish rugby. Congratulations to Josh van der Flier whose remarkable form earned him the 2022 World Rugby Men's 15s Player of the Year. In doing so, he became just the third Ireland player after Keith Wood and Jonathan Sexton to win the prestigious accolade.

I would also like to acknowledge the work of David Nucifora and the High-Performance Department for helping to ensure world-class standards are being met and exceeded on a consistent basis.

Professional sport does not stand still and already the clock is ticking towards France 2023. This brings fresh challenges and new peaks to scale, but this squad and management can approach the challenge with justified optimism, built upon years of dedication and commitment to excellence, all underpinned by the support of so many. We wish them every good fortune in this forthcoming Rugby World Cup.

The achievements of our U20s over the past couple of seasons have been immense, culminating in their back-to-back Grand Slam victory in Cork on Sunday, March 19. After three Under-20 Grand Slam titles in the last five years, I believe that there are wonderful days ahead and we look forward to their quest for even greater glory in the World Rugby U20 Championship this summer in South Africa. Our thanks to U20s coach Richie Murphy and the wider backroom



staff for their commitment as they continue to prepare our talented crop of young men to exacting standards, which in turn has led to the most successful era ever for the Under-20s, and indeed prepare them for the next phase in their development.

Discussions on proposals around a new Global Men's Calendar are ongoing with a new competition format focused on enhancing the July and November windows. This will not impact the Six Nations or The Rugby Championship but will create a better narrative across hemispheres, generate increased revenues to invest in the game and provide a pathway for emerging nations. Conversations with all stakeholders are ongoing, with players at the heart of discussions, and there is an ambition to reach positive conclusion later this year targeting 2026 for a proposed new biannual competition.

### Women's Rugby

The Ireland Women's Sevens team secured a historic qualification for the 2024 Paris Olympic Games. The team and management have been steadily building towards Olympic qualification for the last number of years and it has been a specific goal of Irish rugby in this cycle. I was proud and delighted to see Lucy Mulhall and her players realise this ambition in what is a highly competitive World Sevens Series. Congratulations to Lucy, her teammates, the management team, support staff and everyone involved from our High-Performance department on this sensational feat.

I would like to also acknowledge the significant efforts of Nichola Fryday and the Ireland team in the TikTok Women's Six Nations Campaign. The players put everything they had into representing their country and Irish Rugby could not have asked any more of them, we have no doubt that there will be more successful campaigns ahead. On the wider front, I want to





thank the many hard working and committed staff and volunteers in our schools and clubs who are striving to foster and develop more and more girls into our sport, forming the basis for ever improving standards and, ultimately, success at Representative levels.

This year the IRFU has increased funding for the women's game from €3.1m in 2021 to €6.4m in direct annual investment, a tangible statement of the IRFU's commitment to accelerating growth in the women's game.

We also welcome the World Rugby Women's global calendar consultation process that has commenced with a view to bringing greater alignment and clarity to the women's global game from 2025 on.

### Achieving

Following the publication of the 'Women in Rugby' Report, published in December 2022, a series of wide-ranging initiatives have been sanctioned and initiated which we believe will have a major, positive impact on the women's game and women in our game across Ireland. Let us not be under any illusion, this will take time to see real progress. This is not an excuse; it is stating a fact. The report will form the basis of a new strategic plan for Rugby in Ireland, which will be published later this year,

covering the period from 2023 to 2028. Let me be clear; the IRFU's commitment to the women's game, and, to the women in our game is unwavering and unequivocal.

### Clubs

The club game is the bedrock of rugby in Ireland and the IRFU is committed to continuing to support clubs which are, for many, the entry point and ongoing constant of the game of rugby. Over the past season the IRFU has committed over €11 million to the grassroots game, but in addition, under the leadership of our Rugby Development Director Colin McEntee and his hard-working team we have invested significant human resources to support the outstanding volunteers in club's the length and breadth of the island. These are the people who power our game week in, week out. The IRFU is committed to maintaining and, where feasible, expanding this investment in club rugby.

The Energia All-Ireland League Men's Divisions have enjoyed a tremendously successful season with the quality of play and competitiveness consistently remarked upon throughout the season. This culminated in yet another outstanding final in a repeat of last year's encounter between Terenure College RFC and Clontarf FC. The atmosphere and colour brought by the supporters of both clubs

to the Aviva Stadium was a superb advert for the league and my congratulations to Terenure who turned the tables on Clontarf and ran out deserving winners.

Congratulations to Blackrock College RFC who lifted the Energia All-Ireland League Women's Division in December in what was a highly entertaining final with Railway Union on a scoreline of 27-7 at Energia Park.

I also had the pleasure of attending the Leinster Provincial Towns Cup final in Athy RFC when Tullow defeated Kilkenny. To see the passion and energy of the supporters reinforced the powerful connections that rugby clubs have in communities across Ireland.

### Referees

Without referees there would be no game and we are well served by a talented and committed group that continues to serve Irish rugby well, both domestically across Clubs, Schools, and Youth levels, in the Energia All-Ireland League and internationally at Club and International levels. Our thanks to all our match officials for your hard work in ensuring the smooth running of fixtures and to all who administer the game across Irish rugby, it is important that all involved in our game continue to show respect and support for our match officials at all times as has always been a core value of our sport. I would also like to congratulate our four match officials - Andrew Brace (Referee panel), Chris Busby (Assistant Referee panel), Brian MacNeice and Joy Neville (both TMO panel) - who were each appointed to officiate at the forthcoming Rugby World Cup 2023 in France. Joy also became the first female to be appointed for a Men's Rugby World Cup, something of which we are all incredibly proud.

### Sevens

Our Men's and Women's Sevens squads have competed internationally across the HSBC World Rugby Sevens Series, with our Women's side most recently achieving their ultimate ambition of Olympic Qualification for the Paris 2024 Games. They followed in the footsteps of the Men's squad, who made history in Tokyo 2020, and it remains the focus of the Men's team to book their place in Paris when they compete at the European Games in Krakow in June.

Highlights of the 2023 Series include a silver medal for the Men in Dubai last December, coming just months after James Topping's side claimed a memorable bronze medal at Rugby World Cup Sevens in Cape Town. Terry Kennedy's outstanding performances were recognised as he became the first Ireland Sevens Player to win World Rugby's Sevens Player of the Year award.

The Sevens schedule is demanding, and the competition is high internationally, and great credit must go to all the coaches and players for their hard work in flying the Irish Rugby flag with pride. We wish our Men's Sevens well, after finishing a very credible 8th place overall in the World Sevens Series in their ongoing efforts to qualify for Paris 2024 in the upcoming European Qualifiers.

### Player Safety

Rugby is a magnificent team sport and for the vast majority of people who play our sport the risks involved are far outweighed by the lifelong enjoyment and benefits it brings to those who play – friendships, camaraderie, life connections and a sense of community. These are an invaluable part of the game and in turn the personal development of those who play the game.

We care deeply about the health and wellbeing of players. Many involved in the running of the game across the island are parents or relatives of players. Within that context player welfare is always of paramount importance to the IRFU, and we are constantly reviewing safety protocols.

The IRFU has led the rugby world in some areas of player safety management, cares deeply about those impacted by concussion and we are committed to ensuring the sport's long-term safety.

Our approach, based on scientific evidence, involves a commitment to ongoing education, monitoring, and the application of safety protocols across the game. Against the context the IRFU have carried out a widespread consultation on lowering the tackle height across the amateur game to below the lower end of the sternum (belly tackle) and have decided to opt into the World Rugby 2-year trial to be run by the IRFU, commencing 2023/24.









### Equity, Diversity, and Inclusivity (EDI)

In March we announced the appointment of Anne Marie Hughes, as the IRFU's first Head of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusivity (EDI). This appointment had its roots in the IRFU Spirit of Rugby Programme and recognises the desire for an increased focus on inclusivity and diversity across our game. In her role Anne Marie will lead the development and implementation of ED&I policies as important pillars across Irish rugby. We see this as an appropriate and exciting time for rugby to embrace a new chapter in sports governance, including our commitment to a minimum 40% female representation on the Union Committee by year's end.

### Provinces

Even though Leinster lost the Champions Cup final, they can look back with pride on their efforts throughout the campaign.

This season has been a hugely competitive one for the provinces, resulting in all four reaching the knockout stages of the URC, and Munster winning the final. Thanks to all those across the provinces who work so hard to nurture talent at all levels and in helping to grow the profile of the sport.

### Financial Sustainability

The theme this year has been of the continued rebuilding of our balance sheet, while emphasising the need to continue living within our means.

Over the past 12 months it has become all too apparent that the game must operate on a financially sustainable basis, the IRFU together with the Provinces are determined to do so. It is critical, and the IRFU's firm intention, that Irish Rugby will continue to operate within our means, only spending funds that it either has or can predict with relative certainty.

The finances of the IRFU, following the impact of Covid-19 have stabilised. There remains a long-term cost in terms of dilution of the IRFU's assets, together with a negative impact on our future cash flows, but are continuing to strengthen our financial base in anticipation of the future demands that will be placed on us. I want to acknowledge and thank the Government, again for their critical support during Covid-19 and their ongoing support of Irish rugby and sport generally.

### Committee

We are incredibly fortunate to have a committed team of men and women who care deeply about the game, led superbly by our President John Robinson who was such a positive and proactive presence over the course of the last year. John is a hugely popular figure in Irish rugby, and I would like to thank him for his hard work, leadership, and wise counsel throughout the year. On that note, I would like to wish incoming President Greg Barrett well next season and I look forward to working closely with him and the various committees. I would like to acknowledge the hard work of all IRFU committee members and others who so willingly provide of their expertise on a voluntary basis to the Union.

To our Honorary Treasurer Patrick Kennedy, Chair of the Management Committee Niall Rynne, and all of our various representatives at Committee level, thank you for your efforts over this past season. Quite simply the IRFU could not function without you.

There are exciting initiatives afoot at "Board level", key amongst them being the IRFU's stated commitment to achieving 40% female representation on the Union Committee by the end of this year. This is further affirmation of our commitment to women in rugby in Ireland and another progressive step on our journey. In addition, the Union has commenced a path towards incorporation which we hope will conclude within the next 12 months.

Included in the following pages is a wide tapestry of activities coming under the remit of the IRFU. It shows an organisation that is diverse and vibrant, an organisation that is adapting to keep pace with the demographic and cultural changes of our island and an organisation conscious of the need to continue generating the financial resources required to underpin its ambitious plans. The challenges, as ever, remain great but I am fully confident that between our devoted volunteers and professional staff these challenges will be met, overcome and, ultimately, deliver an exciting and productive future for rugby in Ireland.

## Conclusion

Financially, the IRFU is on a stable footing once more and I am proud of the robustness and adaptability that our game has shown in the wake of unprecedented challenges. If Covid taught us anything, it's the importance of family and community, and in offering a hand to help people up. I would like to acknowledge at this point the vital financial contribution of the Government, not least the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport, and Media. Without their support in recent years especially, as well as that of our partners in Sport Ireland, the game would have struggled.

On that note I would also like to extend my sincere thanks to Vodafone, Canterbury, our stadium partners Aviva, and all of our sponsors for their support of Irish rugby. Each of our sponsors play an important role in funding and promoting the game at all levels and it is greatly appreciated.

Off the field, one of my personal highlights from the season just gone was the event hosted in the Irish Embassy in London to mark to the 50th anniversary of the famous 1973 clash between Ireland and England in Dublin. To be present amongst true heroes of the game was a wonderful thrill and reminded me of the camaraderie and friendship which rugby fosters both in Ireland and internationally. It also reiterated my belief that there is far more in life that unites us, than divides us.

It is important to have a sense of where we came from to understand where we are and where, indeed, we're hoping to go. And as we look ahead to our 150th year of international rugby in the 2024/25 season, we will aim to celebrate and recognise the efforts of those who have played a part in the growth of the game in Ireland.

We will publish a new Strategic Plan for Rugby in Ireland later this year, designed to futureproof our game, and this will provide a positive pathway for the future rugby in Ireland over the next five years.

To our dedicated team of players, coaches, committees, staff, and volunteers across the provinces – thank you for your outstanding contribution to the game. It is incumbent on all of us who are fortunate to be involved in the game to continue to make it an inclusive and accessible sport for all.

There are many challenges facing the wider game and, indeed, society at present, but rugby is in rude health in Ireland and there's a bright future ahead for the next generation. We are keen to engage with new and existing participants at grassroots level and work closely with the four Branches who continue to do such great work in introducing people to the game. We will also look to broaden the profile of Irish rugby internationally and continue to look at ways in which our global footprint can be expanded.

There is a renewed commitment by the Committee and staff to ensure that the positive trajectory the game is enjoying continues to build in the months and years to come, in particular within the women's game. We may not be where we want to be in every aspect of our great game, but we will continue to move forward with purpose and conviction.

Thank you for your ongoing support of Irish rugby.









## HIGH PERFORMANCE

### MEN'S NATIONAL TEAM

#### November Internationals

A clean sweep of victories was achieved during the November Internationals and saw the team complete the Calendar year still ranked number 1 in the world. Ireland achieved victories, for the first-time, over New Zealand, South Africa and Australia within a calendar year.

In all, 84 players played in Irish representative teams (Ireland Senior, Ireland 'A' and Emerging Ireland) in 2022. Seven players earned their first cap with Ireland Senior team – Jack Crowley, Mack Hansen, Jeremy Loughman, Michael Lowry, Joe McCarthy, Jimmy O'Brien and Cian Prendergast.

Irish Players were rewarded with earning 50% of the total number of World Rugby Player/Coach of the Year nominations. Ireland won both men's player of the year awards with Josh van der Flier winning the XV's award and Terry Kennedy the Men's 7s Player of the Year.

Johnny Sexton (MXV) and Amee-Leigh Murphy Crowe (W7s) were also nominated for World Player of the Year awards.

#### Guinness Six Nations

The Irish team completed the Grand Slam winning all five games in the Guinness Six Nations. Ten Irish players were included in the Guinness Six Nations Team of the Championship.

#### RWC Warm Up Games

Ireland will play Italy on 5th August and England on the 19th of August in the Aviva Stadium. The third and final warmup fixture is against Samoa in Bayonne, France on Saturday 26th August.

#### Emerging Ireland Tour to South Africa

The Emerging Ireland squad won all three matches on the tour. The tour provided the National coaches with an abundance of in-depth information on the 34 players after being able to work so closely with them under national team conditions for two weeks.

### Women's XV

Gillian McDarby was appointed as Head of Women's Performance and Pathways in August 2022.

#### Women's XV High-Performance Programme

The new full-time women's programme, which operates out of the IRFU High Performance Centre, officially began on the 2nd of November. There are currently 18 full-time women's XV players.

#### TikTok Women's Six Nations

A squad of 32 players (8 uncapped) was announced at the start of March for the TikTok Women's Six Nations. Ten of these players are playing with clubs in the UK. There are a further 12 players in the wider training panel and they attended a development training camp on the 4th and 5th of March alongside the Irish based players.

The team had a difficult TikTok Women's Six Nations, beginning with a 31-5 loss away to Wales and a 53-3 loss at home to France in Musgrave Park. Ireland lost 24-7 away Italy in the next round on the 15th of April before hosting England in Musgrave Park on the 22nd of April. Despite the scoreline, 48-0 there were signs of improvement. Ireland completed their campaign with a 36-10 defeat to Scotland at Edinburgh's DAM Health Stadium. This defeat meant that Ireland finished bottom of the TikTok Women's Six Nations table.

#### Combined Provinces

The Celtic Challenge took place over a six-week period from the 22nd of January to the 25th of February.

The Combined Provinces, sponsored by Vodafone, training squad of 43 players was selected after round two of the Interprovincials. The squad assembled on the 24th of January and trained every Tuesday and Thursday at the HPC. The Combined Provinces won all four of their games and was deemed by management as a great chance to work with a wider player group and management team. Five players that played in the Celtic Challenge have earned first Ireland call up for the Six Nations. It was seen as an important stepping-stone, building from AIL/Interpros into the Six Nations.

### Centres of Excellence/Pathways

The Centres of Excellence are being established provincially and these will be based in universities within each province. An athletic performance coach and talent pathway coach has been appointed in each of the four provinces to cater for 16–23-year-old players. These athletes will be provided with technical coaching, athletic performance coaching and all the relevant service provisions to support our pathway structures.

### U18 Six Nations

The U18 Women's Six Nations Festival took place at Wellington College in England between the 7th – 15th of April with the team performing strongly. Head coach Larissa Muldoon has overseen a series of camps at the IRFU's High-Performance Centre on the Sports Ireland campus across March and early April.

Across the first two match days each team played four 35-minute fixtures followed by a full 70-minute fixture on the third match day. Just six players who participated in the inaugural tournament last year in Edinburgh returned to the squad this year – Molly Boote, Beth Buttiner, Katie Corrigan, Sarah McCormick, Robyn O'Connor and Orla Wafer.

Ireland played 35-minute fixtures against France and Italy and played in the same format against Scotland and England, finishing the Festival with a 70 minute fixture against Wales on Saturday 15th April which the team narrowly lost 19-17. All games were live streamed by Six Nations.

### U20/U23

Ireland is currently in negotiations with Italy, Scotland and Wales to organise 2-3 friendly internationals in June 2023 for the U20/23 age-grade.





## SEVENS

### Men's 7s

On the 7s front, the Ireland Men's 7s team won a bronze medal at the Sevens Rugby World Cup in Cape Town in September 2022.

The final event of the men's World Series took place on the 20th to the 21st of May in London. The men were defeated by Argentina, the tournament winners, in the 1/4 final. Ireland was defeated 21-19 by France in the 5th place playoff to finish in 6th place.

Ireland finished in 8th place on the overall World Series table and was the 2nd ranked European team after France. The highlight of their series was their 2nd place finish at the Dubai 7s in December.

The top 5 gained automatic qualification for the Paris 2024 Olympics.

The squad continues to work hard on building depth and also looking for playing opportunities for the

wider squad. The squad has had multiple training tournaments where they competed in the Elche 7s in Spain in October, Dubai at the start of December and LA at the end of February.

### Women's 7s

Our congratulations to the players and management of the Women's 7s team who secured a place at the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris after a superb performance in Toulouse. This group of players has worked extremely hard over the course of the last eight years and this landmark achievement is reward for their efforts. They will continue their planning over the coming weeks and months and we look forward to watching them showcase their talent on the highest stage next year.

The women's squad is also working hard on building depth and providing greater playing opportunities for the wider squad. The squad trained and played against France in Marcoussis, France for a 5-day training camp in October 2022. More training matches were organised against the

French 7s team in November at the HPC to use as preparation for the first leg of the 2023 World Series. We also hosted France and Spain at the HPC in mid-February 2023 for three days to assist in our player development programme.

The women's 7s development squad also competed in the Elche 7s in October and the Dubai 7s tournament in December. It was a good opportunity to expose these players to national opposition and to get more 7s game time.

### European Games

The European Games take place in Kraków, Poland from the 25th – 27th of June and is an Olympic qualifier. Our men's 7s team will be competing at this. France will not be competing at this tournament as they have already qualified for the Olympics as hosts.

The winner of the European Games will gain qualification to the Olympics. Second and third placed teams will qualify for an Olympic Repechage tournament which will take place in May/June 2024. The winner of this tournament will qualify for the Olympics with the 2nd placed team potentially gaining qualification.

### Rugby Europe

Both our men's and women's teams will be competing in Rugby Europe. Round 1 of Rugby Europe will be played in the Algarve, Portugal on the 10th & 11th of June and will be used as a seeding tournament for the European Games mentioned above. Round 2 of the Rugby Europe Championship will take place on the 8th and 9th of July in Hamburg, Germany.

### U18s Boys and Girls Sevens Rugby Europe

The U18s Girls Championship will take place in Prague on the 15th and 16th of July while the U18 Boys Championship will take place in Switzerland at the same time.

### U20 Six Nations 2023

Led for a second successive season by Head Coach Richie Murphy and Manager Tom Kavanagh, the side played three fixtures against Italy, Leinster Development and Munster Development prior to the commencement of the 2023 U20 Six Nations. The side performed admirably throughout the tournament culminating in

a second successful Grand Slam in a row, a feat that had never been attained at this age-grade before. The squad acquitted themselves excellently throughout the tournament and represented their families, schools, and clubs with distinction. The management team also deserve acknowledgement for their expertise and dedication to developing the players holistically.

Ireland U20 (49) v Italy U20 (50)

Munster Development XV (26)  
v Ireland U20 (40)

Leinster Development XV (35)  
v Ireland U20 (24)

Wales U20 (27) v Ireland U20 (44)

Ireland U20 (33) v France U20 (31)

Italy U20 (27) v Ireland U20 (44)

Scotland U20 (7) v Ireland U20 (82)

Ireland U20 (36) v England U20 (24)

### Under 20 – Summer 2023

The World Rugby Under-20 championships are returning this summer following a 4-year break since 2019. Cape Town South Africa will be the host venue for competing sides and Ireland have been drawn to play England, Fiji, and Australia in the pool stages. Two play-off games will then ensue depending on results of the pool games. Preparations for the tournament will begin in late April, with the championship due to run from June 24th to July 15th.

### Under 19 v France – Graulhet and Cahors 2023

The Ireland U19 squad travelled to France to play their annual two game series against the France U19 side. A 28-man squad, led by Head Coach Mark Butler and Manager Noel McKenna, played on the 8th of April in Graulhet and will play again on the 12th of April in Cahors. At the time of writing only one fixture had been played.

France U19 (52) v Ireland U19 (7)

France U19 v Ireland U19









### Under 18 Six Nations Festival – Dublin 2023

The IRFU hosted the U18 Six Nations festival this year, with competing teams training out of the high-performance centre in Blanchardstown and playing three rounds of matches at Energia Park, Donnybrook. A 26-man squad led by Head Coach Paul Barr and Manager Stephen O'Hara played three fixtures against their counterparts from Scotland, Wales, and England. Ireland started off the Six Nations Festival with wins over Wales and Scotland before suffering a heavy loss in the final game to England.

**Ireland U18 Schools (36)**  
**v Scotland U18s (20)**

**Ireland U18 Schools (48) v Wales Under-18 (17)**

**Ireland U18 Schools (14) v England Under-18 (56)**

### U18 Clubs – Italy, Rome 2022

The Ireland Clubs side played their annual Halloween fixture against the Italy U18 in Rome on November 5th, 2022. A 24-man squad, led by Head Coach Damien McCabe and Manager Anthony McKibben, spent a week in camp at The Kings Hospital school in preparation prior to the fixture. The match itself was held at the Centro di Preparazione Olimpica Giulio Onesti, Rome. Both players and management can be rightly proud of their contributions in an entertaining fixture.

**Italy U18s (10) v Ireland U18 Clubs (43)**

### U18 Club and Schools – Ashbourne 2023

The Ireland U18 Clubs and Schools recommenced their international programme with a one-off fixture against the Italy U18 side on Sunday the 2nd of April. This fixture was facilitated by the Italian U18 side coming out a week early in preparation for the U18 Six Nations festival. Led by Head Coach Fiach O'Loughlin and Manager Anthony McKibbin, a 23-man squad was selected and spent time in preparation camps and played the Ireland U18 Schools side prior to the game. A fine game developed, played in a great spirit before a large crowd, with Italy nudging the contest. It is hoped to continue to develop the Clubs and Schools programme with further fixtures next season.

**Ireland U18 Clubs and Schools (24)**  
**v Italy Under-18 (26)**

### National Talent Squad (NTS)

The NTS numbers grew this season to 87, from last season's figure of 69. This reflects well on the tremendous work being done in schools and clubs and throughout the player pathway systems in Ireland. Under the continued guidance of National NTS and Talent ID manager Wayne Mitchell, provincial talent coaches and multi-discipline teams, players are being educated and resourced to aid their development in a holistic manner.

### IQ Rugby

IQ Rugby continues to identify and support Irish qualified athletes who have the potential to play professional rugby in or for Ireland. The IQ Rugby programme is looking to strengthen existing networks and connection with the Irish diaspora to identify Irish qualified playing and coaching talent.

IQ Rugby players have again contributed to Ireland representative teams this season with Sam Monaghan starring for the national women's XVs, while the previously uncapped Kathryn Buggy and Clara Neilson were included in the Women's Six Nations squad. They both came off the bench against France in the Six Nations in Cork to earn their first caps. Chay Mullins gained national honours with the Emerging Ireland squad and Ireland Seven's and several other players were involved in Underage Ireland teams over the Easter period.

IQ Rugby has hosted talent ID and development days across the UK during the 2022/23 season. The IQ tour of Ireland will take place in late July with fixtures organised against Ulster U19 on the 26th and Connacht U19 on the 29th.

### REFEREE DEPARTMENT

#### Domestic Refereeing

Season 2022/23 saw us continue to re-group after the Covid-19 impacted years.

This season started with the four Provincial pre-season seminars and the National Referee Camp taking place to set all match officials up for the season. August 2022 also saw the running of the first National Female Referee Day which was an opportunity to bring Female referees from the 4 provinces together for some S&C education along with some technical / practical workshops.

On the field, we continued to see the number of active referees increase and a big thank you to all of these match officials who continue to make themselves available to contribute so games can go ahead with many examples of referees accepting multiple appointments over each weekend. Across the four provinces we welcomed 115 new trainee referees through the new referee courses. This season has seen the further development of coaching/mentoring programmes for referees at various stages of their development.

While the game continues to grow, an ongoing challenge remains retention of experienced referees to facilitate the increased number of games.

Our National Panel continue to deliver the highest standard on and off the field for the All-Ireland Leagues and National appointments facilitating over 500 IRFU appointments. Across the four Provinces over 13,500 fixtures were appointed to.

Education continues to be a vital pillar and Gainline has again proven to a great tool for the IRFU and the referees. The new evaluation model that was introduced a couple of years ago continues to improve with every tweak. Thank you to all of our volunteers who continue to give up their time to deliver some workshops, evaluate, mentor and coach our referees.

Katie Byrne represented the IRFU at the Girls U18 Six Nations Tournament in the UK with Keane Davison being selected to represent the IRFU at the boys tournament being hosted in Dublin. Both Peter Martin and Robbie Jenkinson have been selected to referee at various World Rugby and Rugby Europe tournaments.

### High Performance

This season saw Eoghan Cross join the High-Performance Referee team. All five Referees have represented the IRFU to the highest level across all competitions delivering consistently high performances in URC, EPCR and World Rugby tournaments. In addition to our on-field appointments, we continue to see our TMOs be appointed to a high number of games.

Andy Brace, Chris Busby, Joy Neville and Brian MacNeice are set for a busy few months as they

prepare to represent Ireland at the Rugby World Cup later this year. All four were recently named in the Match Official Panel for the tournament in France.

For Brace it will be a second World Cup appearance, he was an Assistant Referee in Japan in 2019 while Busby and MacNeice will experience the World stage for the first time.

For Neville, who refereed the Women's Rugby World Cup final in 2017, it marks another milestone as the first female official at the Men's Rugby World Cup.

Our National Panel continue to support our High Performance Referees and play a significant part in the overall success of IRFU Match Officials in the professional game.

### High Performance Centre

2022 saw continued growth through the HPC across all teams. As the facility came out of Covid restrictions, the building reached new levels of footfall, with an average of 1,400 meals provided by the kitchen monthly in the first half of 2022, and an average of 1,700 for the second half of the year.

The French W7s squad were hosted, with further 7s host matches planned in 2023 to include Spain for collaborative work. Further collaborations took place through the year culminating in an Ulster travelling party travelling for a one-day camp with the U20s squad. Underage Interpro' competitions were held throughout summer months, in addition to successful Six Nations and November International windows for the MXV side.

In Q4 2022, the Women's XV centralised programme began at the HPC, with three squads now running consistently out of the facility (M7, W7, WXV), and the plans to grow to five full squads at any one time on site during peak seasons, totalling over 200 athletes and staff.

Building operations towards the end of 2022, prioritized changing room upgrades for this new programme, as well as additional workspaces for team staff. Further working areas have been added to multiple offices, a new meeting space with upgraded video conferencing abilities and three work pods for private work and meeting space are all to come. IT and HR are now on-site multiple

days per week, trying to improve the connection between the High Performance department and the rest of the IRFU staff base.

Staffing updates for the HPC include the appointment of a new Operations Manager in Q4 2022 and the appointing of a second full-time chef to facilitate full time meal delivery more regularly, as well as the opportunity for further strategic planning from a kitchen point of view.

Challenges from 2022 for the HPC, include the booking of additional areas during busy periods from Sport Ireland, on both a logistics and cost side, as well as the general capacity limits in the building moving into 2023 with MXV World Cup preparation, U20 World Championship and Olympic qualification.

### Rugby Department

The role of the IRFU Rugby Development Department is changing continually as society changes and our game evolves. What remains critical for Irish Rugby is the need for a continuous supply of players, volunteers/parents, teachers/coaches and referees, to meet the demands of the Irish game.

A full season is well underway, with all national and provincial competitions, supported programmes (coaches, referees, leadership, safeguarding, safe rugby etc.) completed and evolving both online and in-person.

The Energy support grant funding by Government and Sport Ireland was provided to all clubs to support the losses occurred by an increase in energy costs endured by our clubs. This funding was greatly appreciated by our clubs, and we acknowledge the continued support by Government and Sport Ireland. Furthermore, the Sport Ireland Field Grant is pivotal in funding programmes at both National and Provincial level.

The overall numbers participating in rugby now show an increase, with 246,520 recorded. We have seen an increase in female participation across all areas of the game, with a slight decline in male adult participation particularly among Junior players, this is also reflected in other International Rugby Unions, however, they are showing greater male participation drop out.

As we embraced this season in sustaining Irish rugby, here are some of the key programmes that we prioritised.

The Women in Rugby review was successfully completed, highlighting a number of opportunities that will enable the IRFU to build on its successes, in growing the game for girls and women. Once the findings of the Women in Rugby Action Plan Review are implemented in full, this will enable us to continue to grow the game and establish greater alignment between the domestic game and high-performance rugby. We will also be looking at competition structures for women in rugby at all levels.

Rugbyconnect (the IRFU online rugby administration platform); as roll-out continues with this new system, we continue to develop and support club, school, game administration across all areas in making the system more user friendly.

We undertook an audit of all programmes, their purpose, inputs and outputs, their delivery process, therefore, prioritising the key programmes for delivery and method. This enables us as a department to become more ruthless in our prioritisation of operations and focus what is most important and that has the biggest impact across the game.

Our online training and education platform (Gainline): Connecting to what our stakeholders “need and want”, is critical, and we have tailored specific and relevant training and education programmes that fit their needs. This includes online information, online education, webinars and in-person courses.

Social Return on Investment Project study launched November 2022. This reflected the positive impact that rugby has in society, the social, economic and health benefits associated with participation within the community. This will add real value to discussions and aid decisions when we look at investing in grass roots.

Inclusive Club Facility grant funding initiative. We have developed an A-to-Z guide for clubs regarding retro fitting their changing facilities to accommodate all genders across two main documents. They are the IRFU Inclusive Facilities

Upgrade Guide, which gives clubs information that they need to upgrade their facilities. This document delves into everything from the personnel needed, environmental considerations, sources of funding and examples of best practise. The second document is the IRFU Inclusive Facilities Grant Scheme which outlines the information needed for clubs to apply for this grant.

### Rugby World Cup Impact 2023

We have established a working group, highlighting and mapping out key areas/initiatives that will improve the rugby experience and growth across the game. An IRFU Rugby Committee Working Group has been established with the goal of making it easy for clubs and schools to tap into the increased attention that comes with a World Cup year. We want to encourage clubs and schools to start conversations around capitalising on the positive impact of Rugby World Cup 2023. The IRFU Rugby Committee is committed to supporting clubs ahead of Rugby World Cup 2023 with a number of initiatives including:

- **Training** and education resources for clubs with a focus on recruitment and retention
- **Access** to game formats that create opportunity and choice for players
- **Promotional toolkits** for your club/school's social media

### Behaviours and Discipline

In the summer months prior to the start of the 2022/23 season, the IRFU undertook to look at one of the growing problems not only in the game of rugby, but across all sports in all countries, the value of respect. To look at this, the IRFU created a Behaviours and Discipline Group which drew on representatives from all provinces including Referees, Competitions and Spirit. Protecting and promoting the values of our game is essential, the culture, on pitch, players, coaches, referee, management, volunteers and spectators, with a zero-tolerance approach, to upholding the values of our game. Clubs and schools were reminded that they are responsible and accountable for the conduct of their supporters as well as their players, coaches and volunteers in accordance with the Spirit of Rugby charter.





The IRFU Union Committee have formally voted to opt into World Rugby's global trial to lower the tackle height in the community game to below the line of the sternum. It follows an earlier vote by the IRFU Rugby Committee and an extensive community consultation process with Irish Rugby stakeholders. The trial will apply to all amateur IRFU and provincial competitions at age-grade and adult levels in clubs and schools for the 2023/24 and 2024/25 seasons. Risk of head injury is at its highest when tackles are made to the head and shoulder while new World Rugby and laboratory studies have shown that head injury risk is lowest when tackles are made to the belly area. The purpose of this trial will be to incentivise greater use of the belly tackle and ultimately reduce incidents of head-on-head impact in the tackle.

For more information see <https://www.irishrugby.ie/playing-the-game/tackle-behaviour/>

We are now more than ever putting a focus on research and insights to inform us of the societal norms in an ever-changing landscape. The positive

rugby experience is our north star, but we need to continentally connect with all our stakeholders to ensure we are aware of their sentiment and therefore, what players, coaches, referees, and volunteers really want from their rugby experience. This will provide us with real evidence as we look to IRFU strategy 2023/28.

#### **Age Grade and Third Level**

This season, over 2,000 participants from 127 clubs participated in the Provincial Aviva Mini Rugby Festivals in Bangor Rugby Club, Old Crescent RFC, Kilkenny RFC and Westport RFC throughout October as well as the girls-only event at Cill Dara RFC in March, culminating in the National Festival at Aviva Stadium on Sunday, 23rd of April. Our grassroots sponsor, Aviva, is incredibly supportive of the mini rugby programme and 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. In all, 77 schools received financial support to operate



rugby programmes with over 20,000 participants, supported by over 1,159 coaches. This season these schools participated in over 10,958 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 six-game finals day hosted at University College Cork, with the following Divisional Winners: SETU Carlow (The Brendan Johnston Cup - Men's Tier 1 Cup), UCC (Men's Tier 2 Cup), Ulster University (Men's Tier 3 Cup), Dublin City University (Women's Tier 1 Cup) UCC (Women's Tier 2 Cup) and Munster Technological University - Cork (Women's Division 3 Cup).

In addition, there were league wins for TUD (Men's Division 1), UCC (Men's Division 2), MTU Cork (Men's Division 3), University of Limerick (Women's Division 1), SETU Carlow (Women's Division 2), TUS Midwest/ATU Sligo Campus (Women's Division 3).

Throughout the season, the IURU hosted their full suite of competitions. Dublin University won the U20 Conroy Cup in October; at the Kay Bowen Cup in the University of Galway in February DCU won the 15s and Maynooth University won the X7s event. Dublin University currently hold the Dudley Cup after they defeated UCD during the course of the season.

On Friday February 10th, as part of UCC's sesquicentennial celebrations, the Irish Students' Team hosted their French counterparts at the Mardyke with the French avenging last year's result by coming out on top on a scoreline of 31-26.

#### **Coach Development**

The 2022/23 season saw an increase in coach development activity, both provincially and nationally. During this season we were positioned to offer the benefits of multi-modal learning

opportunities with a full return to in-person activity. This has allowed coaches to take advantage of developments in our education provision with blended course delivery and the introduction of the IRFU active coach badge which has been made accessible to coaches across children's, youth, and senior levels of the game. These developments have ensured coaches can access development opportunities through both formal delivery mechanisms and online learning opportunities at a time suitable to them.

Throughout this season our provincial coach development staff delivered 62 coaching courses across Ireland to support the education of over 1,390 coaches. The IRFU continues to evolve the delivery of education to coaches; this season we recorded the enrolment of over 6,000 coaches onto IRFU active coach badges with over 800 of those coaches attaining a bronze award or above. Our provincial staff have provided learning opportunities with the provision of 160 in-person workshops through this season, with 2,700 enrolments from coaches across all levels of the game, alongside over 2,000 coaches completing one of the 8 available online modules.

Building on the introduction of coach registration last season through Rugby Connect, registration is now a requirement for all clubs and coaches across the game, we have recorded an increase in registration with over 7,600 coaches deployed in our clubs. Within this process we have seen an increase in female coach registration with 950 female coaches being deployed with teams this season.

Programmes of support have continued with opportunities for coaches to access learning through partner programmes both nationally and provincially with Student Sport Ireland, Sport Ireland, World Rugby, and the International Olympic Committee all providing learning support to coaches at various levels of the game.

#### **Participation Rugby**

The Participation Rugby Pathway is under the deployment of the full-time Community Rugby Officers, and part-time Seasonal Club Community Rugby Officers (CCRO's) who work closely with club and school volunteers. The aim is to create a quality game environment and develop links with local participation initiatives to ensure that







youth (male/female) have a lifelong involvement in the game by having a positive experience. The purpose of the Club Community Rugby Officer (CCRO's) participation programme is to grow participation in Irish Rugby. Attracting new participants to the game through the Provincial Club Community Rugby Programmes is linked to local Clubs and Schools environments.

We continue to have strong participation numbers with over 140,000 school children currently engaged in CCROs Rugby programmes. By having CCROs on the ground, the IRFU continues to deliver Community Social Inclusion Policy and activities. The above outcomes are achieved through the employment of 111 part-time seasonal CCROs and by establishing Club and School links through the deployment of the Play Rugby Programme.

We are now more than ever putting a clear focus on research, data and insights to help better inform us on the changing participation landscape. A positive rugby experience is vitally important, and we need to do continuously connect with all our stakeholders to ensure we are aware of their experiences, needs and sentiment. Therefore, connecting to what players, coaches, referees, and volunteers really want from their rugby Participation experience is imperative.

### Non-Contact Rugby

The IRFU Rugby Department continues to have a very positive partnership with the Irish Touch Association who lend their expertise in the development of Touch Rugby Education Programmes. Touch rugby is played in clubs, schools, and universities and continues to grow. Tag Rugby continues to be a very popular non-contact form of the game and takes place in clubs and universities across the four provinces. The IRFU Rugby Department has developed education around the game that can be utilised by all stakeholders.

### Rugby Administrator Education

The Rugby Department created Training and Education to assist Rugby Administrators through the online learning system and this module educated the Administrators through the different areas of managing club matters.

### IMART

The Rugby Department working hand in hand with Provincial staff to facilitate the very successful IMART festival in Cork. IMART is the International Mixed Ability Rugby Tournament and 28 teams from around the world took part in a mixed ability tournament for players with or without disabilities.

### Development Officers Portal

The Rugby Department staff online work reporting portal, with the help of the IT department, have spearheaded improvements in the Development Officers Portal which will allow the most accurate data capture ever of rugby participants in Ireland. This will form part of our understanding of the journey of a rugby participant from their first interaction to work that will be done in the club or school to allow the sport to be sustainable.

### Staff Training and Development

A key tenet in our Transformational approach to Rugby Development is the Training and Development of our staff across the four provinces. We have engaged with all domestic staff to upskill them across topics such as Tackle Height, Development Officers portal, and how to deliver effective programmes to stakeholders.

### Aldi Play Rugby

The IRFU Aldi Play Rugby programme is 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. This season saw the return of Teacher Training courses ran through the Department of Education and these courses help upskill teachers to deliver their own fun and safe non-contact rugby sessions.

### Technology

Since the launch of Rugby Connect in 2020, the platform has developed in line with user needs. The system is now used for all player, coaches, referees, and club officials' registration, referee allocations and team sheet generations. Moreover, competitions, coaching qualifications and safeguarding are captured on the system through

direct input and links with our education system Gainline. Registration for events such as Give it a Try are also now done through the system.

The administrative burden on volunteers across multiple areas of the game has now decreased significantly. Furthermore, administrative workload for internal and provincial reporting has been simplified by readily, accurate and clean data extraction from the system into our data visualisation tool QlikSense. This streamlining and ease of access to data is being continually improved and is an ongoing project ahead of the new season along with improving user experience across all elements of the system.

### Women's Rugby

The Women's All-Ireland League consisted of 9 teams for the season 2022/23. The league final was once again contested by Blackrock College RFC and Railway Union RFC in Energia Park and was broadcast live on TG4, with Blackrock winning the title. The conference final saw Wicklow RFC taking on Galwegians RFC. In a closely contested final Wicklow RFC took the spoils to win their first WAIL Conference title. The WAIL cup final was played between Railway RFC and UL Bohemians with Railway RFC coming out as winners.

The U18s Interprovincial series ran in the late summer window with Leinster U18s taking the title for the 2022/23 season. The Senior Interprovincial series was played in January 2023 to help facilitate preparations and selections for the inaugural Celtic Cup. Munster won back-to-back titles on the final day in the Sportsground. Once again TG4 provided broadcast coverage for the series which no doubt helps extend the visibility of the game and the players.

The U16 and U18s Interprovincial 7s series will take place in May at the HPC in a repeat of last season's series.

The Canterbury Give it a Try programme once again took place in the Summer of 2022. In all, 86 clubs participated with approximately 2,000 players taking part. There was a conversion of approximately 740 participants who went on to become full members of their respective clubs.

The Aviva Mini Girls Festival took place at Cill Dara RFC once again. Approx. 200 girls at U10 and U12 from across the country participated. Mini girls only teams are increasing year on year and taking part in girls only provincial festivals before getting the opportunity to play in the Aviva Mini festival.





The X Rugby 7s finals took place on April 26th in St. Mary's College RFC. So far this year 95 schools provincially will have taken part in the programme on the way to qualifying for the final's day.

#### **Energia All-Ireland League**

Following last season when again Covid-19 affected a number of matches in both the Men's and Women's All-Ireland Leagues, season 2022-23 saw a full season completed with Covid-19 being a welcome absentee in the calendar. This meant a return to the pre Covid regulations of promotion and relegation in the Men's AIL. The final of Division 1A saw a repeat of last year's final between Clontarf and Terenure College with Terenure running out the winners. Other winners from Divisions 1B-2C after 18 rounds, and thus winning automatic promotion, were City of Armagh, Queens University, Greystones and Instonians.

The Round Robin Series format which now sees two semi-finals and a final saw Ulster's Clogher Valley RFC promoted to the AIL for the first time. The Energia Bateman Cup was played between two first-time finalists in Terenure College and Buccaneers, with Terenure getting their name on the trophy for the first time. The Fraser McMullen U20 trophy returned to Lansdowne FC for the first time since 2017-18 when they beat Dublin University FC in a thrilling final at Lakelands.

The Energia Women's AIL saw the season start with only 9 teams after Malone withdrew from the competition just before the first round.

January/February saw the repositioning of the Interpros and the introduction of the Celtic Challenge Cup. Recognising that clubs would be without their best players when it would come to the finals part of the season, the WAIL was played

over 9 rounds culminating in the final being played between Blackrock College and Railway Union on 17th December, with Blackrock exacting revenge for last season's final loss to the same opposition. The second half of the WAIL season saw a reverse of the fixtures from the first half of the season where teams competed for the WAIL Cup. This was won by Railway Union defeating UL Bohemian in the final on 23rd April at Templeville Road.

This season a Women's All-Ireland Junior Cup was introduced for the first time, with the top two Junior teams from each province competing. The final was played on 16th April and saw MU Barnhall defeat Tullamore to take the honours.

The successful Forum meetings which have been a feature now for several years in both Men's and Women's All-Ireland League representatives started in March as we look ahead to plan next season in 2023-24, a Rugby World Cup year.

Unfortunately, the SRU were not able to participate in the Club International this season, but discussions have already been underway and two Club international matches between the countries have already been slotted into the calendar for March next season.

## SPIRIT REPORT

The Spirit of Rugby programme, created to promote and protect the values of Irish Rugby within the clubs and related organisations, continued post Covid with full engagement by clubs since September 2022. Training and support for players, coaches and volunteers included a blended learning with online modules, in-person training sessions, virtual webinars and advice session. This approach saw greater participation of volunteers with ease of access to information.

### Safeguarding

Spirit Officers worked with Club Welfare Officers to ensure safeguarding documentation was up-to-date, 197 clubs completed the IRFU audit. There was continued vetting and training, with 6,941 vets completed and 2839 volunteers completing safeguarding in rugby training. A new course was created for Club Welfare Officers as well as training for those involved in reporting concerns.

Other new modules to support those working with youth were available to coaches, including 'Tackling Bullying Behaviour, One Good Coach (mental health) and Diversity and Inclusion. These CPD modules are available online and assist volunteers to maintain a safe and fun environment for age-grade players.

The IRFU Youth Council created a Youth Volunteer Award to encourage 16 to 24-year-olds into volunteering. The modules give young players a chance to learn about a range of roles in rugby. In total, 79 volunteers are enrolled, with 10 already achieving the bronze award, 2 silver and 2 gold. The IRFU presented at Sport Ireland's Safeguarding Conference on 28th October on the theme of including the voice of young people.

### Anti-Doping

While there was a reduced number of tests completed due to Covid, testing by both Sport Ireland and World Rugby continued throughout the season, with 216 completed.

A new IRFU online anti-doping education module was created with 1,415 players and support personnel completing to date. A further 38 face-to-face workshops were held for squads at both national and provincial levels.

The IRFU was invited by Sport Ireland to present at the Council of Europe audit visit on the anti-doping programme (6th October 2022).

### Disability and Inclusion

There was further growth of teams and rugby activities for players with a disability, with 44 tag teams and 7 mixed ability teams now active across 4 provinces, and 1 team for players with a visual impairment based in Leinster.

Using funding from Sport Ireland's Dormant Accounts, grant resources were made available to increase access and inclusion with the production of Communication Boards, a coaching toolkit, and videos, all launched by the Minister on 3rd December, International Day of Persons with Disabilities. (Ref: <https://www.irishrugby.ie/2022/12/05/rugby-communications-boards-to-help-clubs-provide-for-people-with-additional-needs/>)

Almost 400 coaches took part in the Disability Inclusion training and 1,286 volunteers completed the online 'Diversity & Inclusion'. Web based resources for coaches and volunteers were updated online.

Following on from the Sport Ireland Get Ireland Walking initiative during Covid, there is now a club walking programme available to those who wish to make their grounds open to the local community and/or encourage former members to revisit the club and meet up with friends, this was launched in World Mental Health Day, Oct 10th (*Ref: <https://www.irishrugby.ie/2022/10/10/irfu-walking-initiative-for-clubs-to-mark-world-mental-health-day/>*).

The IRFU Gender Participation policy was published and workshops provided for staff, volunteers and clubs 29th and 30th November.

A Mental Health working group was formed in January with updated resources and training available early next season.

### **Leadership**

Club volunteer training took place, with 5 online modules and two training weekends for 18 volunteers across the four provinces.

5th March saw the launch of the IRFU Women in Rugby network that will be led in the provinces by graduates of the Spirit of Leadership course, <https://www.irishrugby.ie/video/women-in-rugby-network-launched-to-mark-international-womens-day/>. The network will be a chance for women in all roles and aspects of rugby to share best practice and swap ideas on the growth and development of the game.

### **COMMERCIAL AND MARKETING**

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

On behalf of the Union, I would like to thank Commercial and Marketing Chair, Michael Collopy, his C&M committee, and the Executive department. They have performed very strongly in continuing to strengthen the Irish Rugby brand, generate revenue and to promote and market the game successfully.

The Men's National Team enjoyed a very strong start to the season with an historic series win in New Zealand while on Summer Tour.

In November, our Bank of Ireland Nations Series saw us play host to South Africa, Fiji and Australia with a full Aviva Stadium for our wins against South Africa and Australia, and an over 48,000 strong crowd for our win against Fiji. The demand for a seat in fortress Aviva is as high as ever.

Grand Slam victory in our most recent Guinness Six Nations campaign made for a very exciting St. Patrick's weekend with an atmosphere in Aviva Stadium that was palpably electric. This successful Championship has further helped to endear Irish Rugby into the hearts and minds of the Irish public.

Corporate hospitality has seen a great turnaround from the difficult times in 2020 and we have, with our partners The Hospitality Partnership, seen demand soar across both the Bank of Ireland Nations Series and the Guinness Six Nations.

Viewership figures for our Bank of Ireland Nations Series, for our Grand Slam Guinness Six Nations 2023, and for the TikTok Women's Six Nations, have each remained very strong. We thank all our broadcast partners for their continued support. The Ireland men's championship winning match against England set a new Irish terrestrial TV record for sport with over 1.4million people tuning in.

The IRFU cannot deliver our rugby programmes at grassroots or international levels without our family of partners whom we rely heavily on for their support.

We have emerged from a tough period and have enjoyed a year free from restrictions, reported on in previous years, and have worked extremely hard, together, to get back to our winning ways at the forefront of sponsorship in the Irish market and beyond. We are sincerely grateful to each and every partner of Irish Rugby.

As always, we would like to acknowledge the contribution of Vodafone CEO, Amanda Nelson, and her team for their continued support and promotion of our game, with an additional focus on women's rugby evident from the sponsorship

of the Vodafone Women's Interprovincial Series and as shirt sponsor for the Combined Provinces team. Canterbury have also continued to provide financial support and exceptional kit for our teams, 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 sponsors of the Guinness Six Nations.

I would like to congratulate and thank Musgrave Park and Munster Rugby for hosting the TikTok Women's Six Nations and Under 20s home fixtures against France and England. We have enjoyed record crowds and have had great pleasure in bringing international rugby on the road to Cork.

The TikTok Women's Six Nations in its standalone broadcast window separate from the men's tournament is working well, it allows the Championship the deserved space and time to flourish. This scheduling move has been a great success which has delivered a new audience to the game.

Many congratulations and thanks to PwC and on their continued support to our age grade system especially for the Ireland Under 20s who won a memorable back-to-back Grand Slam in a packed Musgrave Park.

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.

I am delighted to welcome Ballygowan as our official bottled water partner. They have made a substantial and important contribution to the playing squads, and I look forward to the partnership developing across the years.

We thank Bank of Ireland for their support in 2022 and into 2023 as title sponsor of the Bank of Ireland Nations Series, their contribution to rugby in Ireland across the board is significant and appreciated wholeheartedly.

We have renewed three vital partnerships in 2022 with Lucozade Sport, DHL Express and Gilbert, all of which play a key role in our team performances from underage right through to national level.

We have also renewed a long-standing partnership with Dove Men+Care on the National men's team and thank Unilever for their ongoing support and contribution to Irish rugby.

To all of our partners including Energia, Aviva, Bank of Ireland, Opel, Aer Lingus, Tritonlake, Aldi, Eden Park, 3fe, David Barry and all our suppliers, I thank you for your continued support.

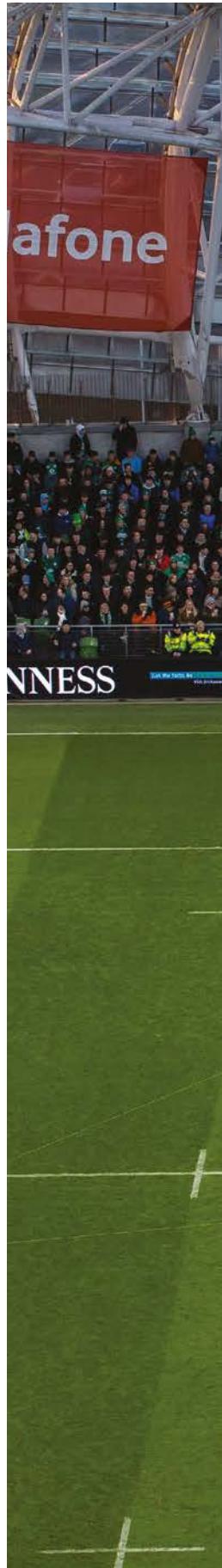
Our partners are most impressive in amplifying their association with Irish rugby which cannot be done without the help and support of our coaches, managers, and players. I thank the management and all the National men's, women's, and underage players for their help in delivering our commercial programmes.

## COMMUNICATIONS

The 2023 season will go down as one of the most successful on and off the field. Starting with the men's national team's historic series victory over New Zealand last summer, the media and communications department has endeavoured to promote and manage the profile at all levels of the game since then.

Ireland enjoyed large attendances across the Bank of Ireland Autumn Nations Series against South Africa, Fiji and Australia and again into the victorious Guinness Six Nations which culminated in a Grand Slam. The Guinness Six Nations was further boosted by the presence of a team from Netflix who had a production team shadow the senior squad from their pre-tournament camp in Portugal down to that magical St. Patrick's weekend in Dublin when the team defeated England. The fruits of this exposure will be evident in the coming months.

The Under 20 team continued to blaze a trail and the level of media interaction was stream-lined, including regular media opportunities, culminating in increased coverage of the Grand Slam wining campaign.





The profile of the Women's game has never been higher, and a strong focus was placed on driving interest and delivering a high standard across the board. The Women In Rugby Report was launched in early December to great interest across the national media. This led to increased exposure of the Vodafone Women's Interprovincial Series and then into the inaugural Celtic Challenge ahead of the TikTok Women's Six Nations. Interest in the Women's game continues to grow at pace and the Communications department will be looking to broaden resources to ensure that the highest standards continue to be met and exceeded.

This season has witnessed a continuation in the evolution of our digital content strategy. Our focus has been on creating platform-specific content that appeals to the emotional and personal connections that people have with rugby.

This strategic change has allowed us to capitalize on some historic moments for Irish Rugby on and off the pitch. As a result, our digital audience has grown by 10% to 2.3 million followers, with over 70 million views on video and another 12.4 million engagements across all platforms.

The impact of TikTok has been particularly significant, with all other platforms reacting to its growth, necessitating a change in our approach to content creation. Although Instagram remains the best performing platform overall, four of the top five most engaged posts in 2022 were on TikTok, and our follower growth there was exponentially higher than the other platforms, at 174%.

The historic series win in New Zealand and the recent Grand Slam victory helped us reach record levels of engagement. The change in strategy has also enabled us to employ different approaches across teams and tournaments, while ensuring a continuity of brand and sponsor inclusion.

For instance, the Women's team adopted a daily diary approach for their historic first-ever tour to Japan. That approach continues with the Inside Camp content from the TikTok Women's Six Nations. Empowering the players to record their journey, the day-to-day life in camp, including training and down days, proved popular with players and fans alike.

In the club game, the change in focus in the Energia AIL has resulted in double-figure growth on YouTube as a primary platform for highlights. Also, concentrating on the IrishRugby.ie website as an Energia AIL hub has seen sustained engagements across our content.

The IRFU Communications Department has also worked closely with the Rugby Development over the past 12 months to manage stakeholder engagement on key projects and ensure Irish Rugby is on the front foot with the right messaging on its newest initiatives.

The success of the first phase of the IRFU's Social Return On Investment project was built on incredible buy-in from club rugby stakeholders. This connection also served to deliver unprecedented levels of engagement through the 'IRFU's State Of The Game' survey and a successful launch to the 'IRFU Women In Rugby Network'.

Proactive communication has been a key driver of the 'IRFU's Community Consultation Process on Tackle Behaviour', while the 'IRFU Spirit Of Volunteer Awards' provided a platform for clubs and schools to communicate their own appreciation for their valued volunteers.

Every new initiative brought with it the platform to reinforce key messages of the Rugby Development department. With direct input from provinces, a positive experience through rugby formed a central tenet while there was also the opportunity to consistently share a new message - that Rugby is the number one team sport Irish people would like to try, based on findings from the 2022 Irish Sports Monitor.

Looking ahead, the #AnswerTheCall for Rugby World Cup 2023 umbrella campaign offers a platform for clubs and schools to harness the excitement of events in France. It includes communications toolkits and training for clubs and schools in their recruitment and retention of players and volunteers.

Meanwhile, the Supporters Club has emerged from the Covid-19 enforced absence of fans at games. We have seen a surge in memberships which also contributed to our ability to sell out the Bank of

Ireland Nations Series games on the back of the huge win in New Zealand. The Supporters Club is still undergoing changes in delivery of service but continues to drive a significant revenue stream while providing a deeper connection between fans and the national teams.

The Communications department would not be able to deliver the scale and quality of output without the buy-in of the wider IRFU team. To all the players, management, medical and support staff, as well as to all the Committee members and our colleagues across 10-12 Lansdowne Road and the High-Performance Centre and beyond, thank you for your hard work and cooperation.

Finally, to the Communications team based in IRFU HQ and the HPC, as well as to our photographic agency Inpho, the team at Videos On The Net, and all our feature writers and suppliers, especially New Century Publishing who produce and market our match programmes to such a high standard and the wider media, we thank you for your great efforts across the campaign.

It is an enormous privilege to tell the story of Irish rugby and one which the department is committed to driving forward.

## MEDICAL

### PLAYER WELFARE

#### Amateur Game Tackle Behaviours

The IRFU Medical Department have been an integral part of the IRFU consultation process around tackle behaviours in the domestic game. This consultation process resulted in a new law trial reducing tackle height to reduce head-on-head impacts and decrease risk of head injuries. As part of the consultation process, the IRFU Medical Department produced an information guide, outlining the relevant research in the area of head injury and the tackle event. The IRFU Medical Department will continue to monitor and review all available literature in this area as it becomes available.

#### Concussion

The IRFU Medical Department began a thorough review of all concussion guidelines both in the domestic game and the High-Performance game,

following attendance at the Concussion in Sport Consensus meeting in Amsterdam, October 2022. The IRFU Guide to Concussion and Graduated Return to Play guidelines will be updated once publications from the Consensus meeting are available and will be promoted across the game ahead of the 2023/24 season.

The Long-Term Brain Health group has continued developing this year with output including:

- Working with the Nutrition Department to design, develop and implement a nutrition protocol post-concussion, alongside a Long-Term Brain Health Nutrition written resource for players. The Nutrition team will continue to work on player and staff education in this area.
- In-career medical reviews were also introduced this season. The focus of these reviews is on player welfare and not performance, with doctors conducting these at set time-points during a player's career.
- Semi-structured interviews regarding attitudes and knowledge of brain health were carried out with both male and female High-Performance players. These interviews will provide greater understanding of players' knowledge and concerns. Thematic analysis is currently being conducted on these interviews, with a view to a written summary being provided at the end of the season.
- A thorough review of concussion protocols in the High-Performance game is being conducted, however completion of this will await the publications from the most recent Concussion in Sport Consensus meeting (Amsterdam, October 2022).
- A review of the Graduated Return to play in the High-Performance game is being carried out to incorporate the most up to date evidence and adopt a proactive approach to concussion management. This has been done with the involvement of the provincial and national medical teams.





### SAFE Rugby Programme

The SAFE Rugby – Standard Approach to Field Emergencies in Rugby – programme aims to provide SAFE Rugby (Standard Approach to Field Emergencies) is a primarily a first aid/immediate care course designed to provide a standardised method of assessment and management of the initial stages of any injury or medical emergency occurring in rugby at all levels of the community and the professional game.

The SAFE Rugby program is managed by the IRFU Player Welfare Coordinator, Shane Mooney, who oversees a team of some 36 SAFE Rugby tutors in four pods covering the four provinces. To date, we have provided training across all 3 levels to 6,600 attendees. During the 2022-23 season we expect to complete over 45 individual courses with an expected attendance of 750. Our Level 2 SAFE Rugby Immediate Care in Sport course is now the preeminent programme of its type available on the island. We will have hosted over 300 health professionals on this level before the end of the season.

The 2022-23 season saw the introduction of our Sports Taping course. Two Level 2 courses were held in the Aviva Stadium for health professionals, and we expect to run another two courses at the start of next season. We have further developed a course designed for our club and schools' coaches, who are keen to learn the theory and techniques relating to appropriate strapping of joints and muscles.

In a new development for SAFE Rugby, a core group of our expert faculty are now managing the pitch side extrication for all home games in the Aviva Stadium.

### 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. Results from the IRIS Project led to the development of this national programme to help prepare players for the demands of the game and continue performing at their best. ENGAGE is rugby-specific and aimed to be driven by coaches.

The IRFU Medical Department have hosted four virtual webinars and one in-person training day to help upskill coaches in the delivery of this programme. In addition to this, coaches can access an interactive module on GAINLINE as part of their 'Active Coach Badge' and to date, over 400 coaches have completed this module.

Preliminary results from investigations being conducted in the University of Limerick, show positive feedback from clubs in terms of acceptability, appropriateness and feasibility of the programme. Following one full season of use, there appear to be trends in reducing injuries, in particular hamstring injuries across both the men's and women's game.

### Research and Innovation

Research has considerable potential to enhance our enjoyment, wellbeing, participation, and performance. Adopting a proactive approach where projects are initiated to address specific issues (e.g., player injury, environment, technology), enhance current practice (e.g., training prescription, leadership) or identify opportunities for discovery will ensure that research is anchored to performance, safety, enjoyment, and the health of our players and staff. We aim to discover insights that enable players and staff to thrive on and off the field. Our Research and Discovery Programme will integrate player welfare with performance goals. We have identified three key dependencies, upon which to build an effective Research and Discovery Programme: INTEGRATION, INSIGHT, and IMPACT.

### Project focus

We have ongoing projects across a number of areas. In the area of concussion, we have continued our collaboration with Calgary University in the IOC funded multi-centre investigation Prevention, detection and management of concussion in rugby and in addition, we have partnered with UPMC and UL to investigate changes to baseline neurocognitive function in the Professional Players. Regarding tackle behaviours we are also supporting two projects in this area, one investigating the Kinematic and Kinetic modelling of the tackle situation, and the other is investigating women players' experience around tackle coaching, safety, and performance with TCD.

The IRFU was awarded Irish Research Council Employment Based Postgraduate Programme funding. Collaborating with UCD, Chris Leckey has been appointed to investigate the relationship between training, injury, and match performance using a complex modeling approach. Working with TCU, the nutrition department, is investigating nutritional and energetic considerations of development pathway rugby players looking at low energy availability.

Two projects are ongoing in leadership and decision making one understanding and Cultivating High-Performance Environments (HPEs) and Relationships within the IRFU, in collaboration with UCD, the other led by athletic performance is investigating the real-time decision-making qualities of Irish National professional Rugby players with University of Limerick.

#### Enterprise Ireland Collaboration

Enterprise Ireland and the IRFU have entered the next phase of their strategic innovation partnership, as three Irish companies have been selected to test and validate their products with the sporting organisation.

The three Enterprise Ireland 'High Potential Start-Up' companies are: MoveAhead, RugbySmarts and Brace.

#### IRFU Research and Education 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. The committee has an independent chair and representatives from the fields of health and sport, provides oversight and governance to the IRFU, particularly the IRFU Research and Discovery Programme.

To date, 73 applications have been reviewed and 52 have been accepted and supported by the IRFU.

#### EDUCATION & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

##### Performance Support Programme

The Performance Support Programme (PSP) continues to provide oversight and strategic direction for the integrated delivery of support from all the performance support disciplines (medicine, physiotherapy, athletic performance, nutrition, psychology and analysis). The Performance Support Programme Board's focus is to ensure the implementation of the strategy developed last year to encourage staff to Connect, Deliver and Excel. The PSP has led in the development of a Rugby World Cup 23 performance project group and the delivery of the Performance Summit which was held in the Aviva Stadium Oct 22 as well as several integrated performance related projects.

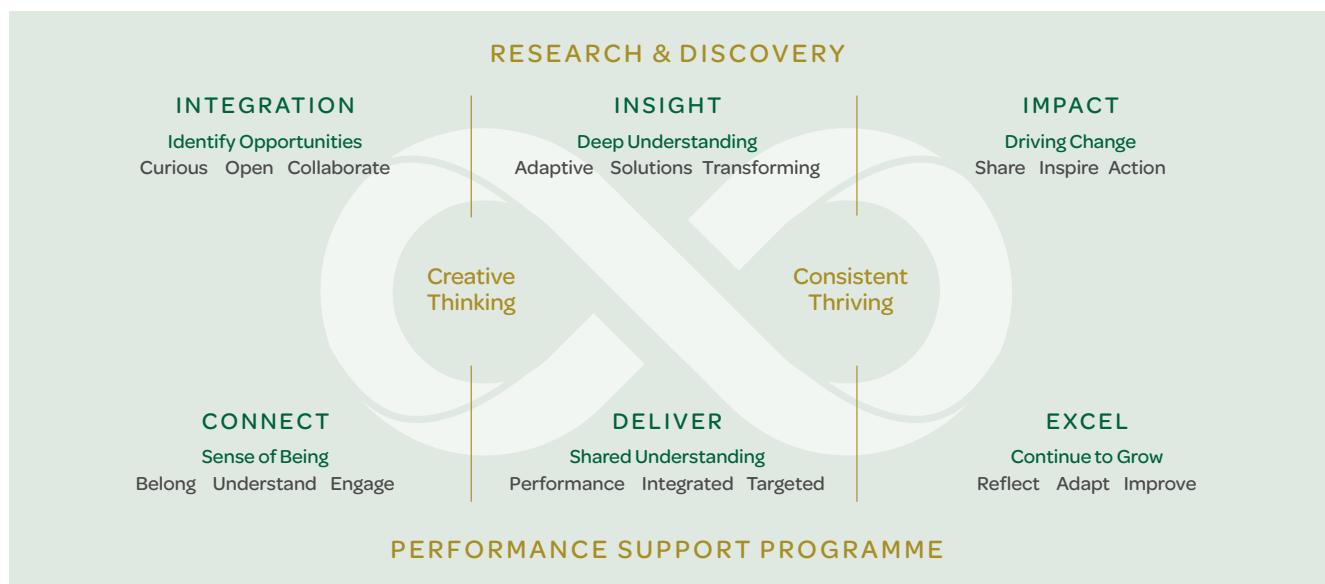


FIGURE 1. Research and Discovery: Key Dependencies for Delivery

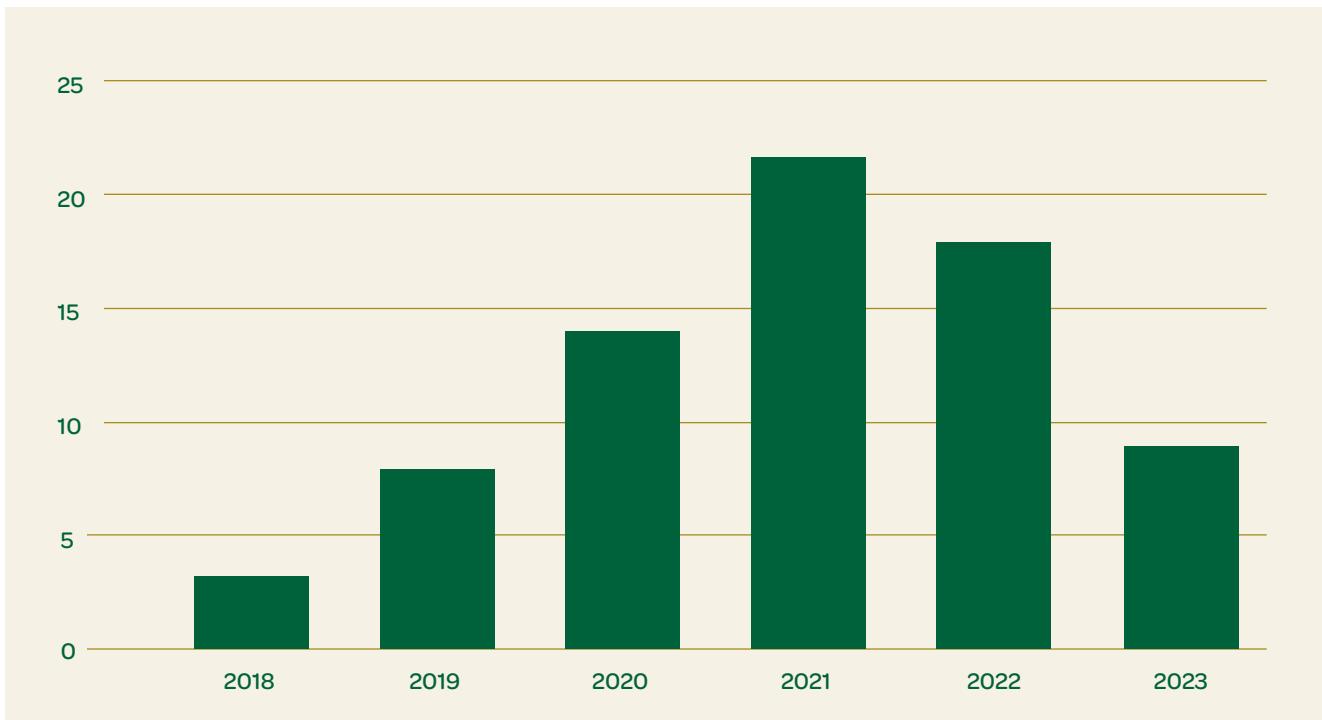


FIGURE 2. IRFU Research Committee Applications received

### Education

This season the monthly lecture series continued, inviting international experts to present to our staff. There were two lectures targeting the newly formed High Performance Women's Programme, which was made available to all departments and specialities working across the women's game.

In-person training and education also resumed this season, starting with a UPMC study day in the High-Performance Centre. This study day brought all High-Performance medical staff together to upskill on concussion assessment and management, under the guidance of renowned experts in this field.

The IRFU Medical Department was involved in the design and organisation of the 'Performance Summit' in November 2022. This was a hugely successful event, where all High-Performance departments were invited to engage with each other, challenge thinking and provide insights.

### Gainline

The IRFU Medical Department is committed to upskilling and supporting those providing medical assistance across all levels of the game. Gainline continues to be an interactive online educational hub that the medical department use

to support learning for both the High Performance and Domestic Game medics. This season an interactive concussion education module was designed on GAINLINE for the referees, and this is to be completed annually going forward. In addition, a concussion education module for schools' players was shared with the Schools' Committee and distributed amongst Senior Cup Teams and Junior Cup Teams. A coach-specific concussion education module was also created for the Youth Coach Curse on GAINLINE.

In September 2022, the IRFU Medical Department and Rugby Department hosted a series of virtual lunchtime webinars aimed at coaches, players, and parents in the domestic game. This series included talks from experts in injury prevention, nutrition, and concussion. These webinars covered:

1. Injury Prevention and ENGAGE
2. Women's Rugby Injuries
3. Nutrition and Fuelling for Performance
4. Concussion: New Considerations

These webinars were recorded and shared with schools and clubs in the domestic game and added to Gainline.

### Mentoring Programme

At the beginning of the season, the IRFU Medical Department established a mentoring programme for all medical and physiotherapy staff. Staff from across the High-Performance system volunteered to become both mentors and mentees with individuals from across the whole system mentoring each other (as well as a small number of external mentors for senior staff). As part of the programme, we have run a series of in-person workshops to develop mentors and provide support for staff. Feedback from the programme has been hugely positive with staff reporting significant growth and development across a range of areas. The plan is for this programme to continue over coming years.

### Staffing

The IRFU medical team expanded this year with the addition of a Performance Psychologist to the team (Dr Siobhain McArdle). The Women's XV team also had a full-time physiotherapist come on board (Roisin Murphy). A full-time rehabilitation physiotherapist joined the team at the HPC, Einar Einarsson, providing focused rehabilitation support to national players.

## INJURY SURVEILLANCE

### High-Performance Game

We have produced over 20 reports on injury surveillance and ongoing player management in the professional game. This included central investigations into injury trends as well as specific requests that looks into specific performance questions and opportunities, such as the prevalence of a specific injury. The 3rd Professional Rugby Injury and Illness Surveillance Report (2021/22) was distributed across the High-Performance system, marking a significant step forward in our ability to accurately document our ongoing injury surveillance. While continuing our efforts in the men's game across the provinces, we are now also able to look at the women's game, our 7s teams, and the U20s. The interactive injury surveillance dashboard is now able to provide immediate feedback and an 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 2022/23 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 IRIS Research Team in the University of Limerick published a 2021/22 season report, detailing injury trends in both the men's and women's club game. Due to the continued impact of COVID-19 on schools' rugby in 2021/22 no season report was available.

During the past season, IRIS expanded school recruitment to include Leinster SCT squads. Reports for both the 2022/23 club and school game will be available ahead of the 2023/24 season.

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.

### Aviva Minis Festivals

In October 2022, four Aviva Mini Festivals were run across the provinces, with 95 teams competing in a total of 190 matches across the four days. Medical attendance logs were completed by the nursing staff in attendance and analysed by the IRFU Medical Department.

A total of 25 medical attendances were reported, which is approximately one medical attendance every eight matches. Male players reported 16 injuries (64%) whereas female players reported nine (36%), however it is worth noting that there were more male players in attendance at the events. Any injuries to the head or neck area were monitored and the parents/guardians were provided with the IRFU Concussion guidelines, however no concussion injuries were diagnosed during the festivals. The majority of injuries were contusions (bruises) to various areas of the

body (hand = 4, head/face = 4, knee = 2, foot = 2, shoulder = 1, neck = 1), followed by ligament sprains (knee = 4, wrist = 2, ankle = 1, shoulder = 1).

### IMART 2022

The International Mixed Ability Rugby Tournament (IMART) was supported by the IRFU and held in Ireland in June 2022. This tournament was the largest of its kind held to date and saw 24 men's teams competing. In addition, the first ever women's mixed ability tournament was held, with four teams competing in a round robin. Preliminary results have reported an injury incidence rate of 15.68 injuries per 1,000 player hours. This is approximately one player sustaining one injury in 48 matches. Injuries to the head/face and ankle were the most common, each accounting for 21% of all injuries. This was followed by the wrist/hand/finger and lower limb each accounting for 17% of all injuries. This initial report highlights areas commonly injured and provides a starting point for future injury surveillance in a mixed ability cohort.

### The High-Performance Centre

The High-Performance Centre (HPC) opened its doors in September 2019. We are now building a team of experts, as part of a fully integrated programme, that provides world-class rehabilitation, strength and conditioning and rugby coaching as well as nutritional and psychological support. This team will work with provincial and national medical teams to develop an integrated return to performance plan. Einar Einarsson has been appointed as the IRFU's Specialist Rehabilitation Physiotherapist and he will work with players of national interest from the senior Men's and Women's squads and the Sevens programme.

Operating out of a centralised hub allows us to increase the intensity of service delivery which can be difficult when servicing a large number of players at the provinces. We are looking to reduce the time the player is unavailable to play, prevent injuries recurring and ensure the player is ready to be re-integrated to the level of rugby required.

### Anti-doping

1st June 2022 – 31st May 2023

Total number of tests 293

TEAM	IN COMPETITION	OUT OF COMPETITION
Men's (15)	10	43
Provincial (including Academy)	23	94
U20s	14	Included in above
Women's (15)	4	0
Women's (7)	15	24
Men's (7)	21	24
All	4	0
Age-grade	8	9
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>99</b>	<b>194</b>

### Notes

1. Figures are for number of tests, carried out between 1st June 2022 – 31st May 2023.
2. Covid continued to impact number of tests due to limited training camps/events for some squads and access to facilities.
3. User Pays tests were reduced but will be restored to higher levels in 2023.

## CHARITABLE TRUST

During 2022 the IRFU Charitable Trust embarked on a restructuring programme, driven mainly by the effects of the pandemic and the need to restructure the organisation to be fit for purpose going forward.

Due to personal reasons, and sadly bereavement, we have lost several Trustees during this period. However, on a positive note, we can announce the addition of four new Trustees.

The IRFU Charitable Trust's primary object is to ensure continuity of care for the 35 seriously injured amateur rugby players across the four provinces of Ireland. Our Care Team liaise with the injured players and their families to identify their individual needs and ensure they live their lives as best they can, given their serious injuries. In the last 12 months we continue to support our seriously injured players with their mobility needs including new wheelchairs and vehicle alterations, home improvements and renovations, physiotherapy and education needs, and our traditional Christmas Hamper which all seriously injured players and their families receive as well as a number of widows of injured players who have sadly passed away.

Our Fundraising Team efforts have delivered very positive results. The team have two objectives: to continue to build awareness for the IRFU Charitable Trust among the ever-increasing rugby supporters base; and to deliver important fundraising initiatives with our generous sponsors. We are very grateful to all our sponsors including Aon, Bank of Ireland and the Vodafone Ireland Foundation, as well as Diageo/Guinness, DMG Media, Fallon & Byrne, Get Broadcasting and Pinergy. Our biggest supporter and partner – the IRFU – continue to assist the Charitable Trust with an Annual Grant and importantly with additional support across advertising, match days, merchandise and communications which is greatly appreciated. In addition, we are very grateful for the support of Connacht, Leinster, Munster and Ulster Rugby including all those individuals, rugby clubs, schools and businesses across the four provinces who support the IRFU Charitable Trust through our FRIENDS Programme.

The RCSI Spinal Injuries research project is progressing and our injured player's research participation through the Personal and Public Involvement (PPI) initiative is a key driver of and a success factor within the project. The Charitable Trust continues to monitor all the IRFU and World Rugby "Safety in Rugby" programmes and will continue to work to support these initiatives in an appropriate way.



## OBITUARIES

<b>D.M. Crowley</b>	Past President (2002-2003)
<b>N.H. Brophy</b>	Past President (1997 -1998)
<b>C.C. Powell</b>	Past President (2010 - 2011)
<b>T. Tierney</b>	Former Ireland Player (1999 - 2000, 8 Caps)
<b>B. O'Brien</b>	Former Ireland Player (1968, 3 Caps)
<b>R.A. Lamont MBE</b>	Former Ireland Player (1968, 3 Caps)
<b>H. McCracken</b>	Former Ireland Player (1954, 1 Cap)



The IRFU wishes to acknowledge the following  
sponsors & suppliers of Irish Rugby

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