



Irish Rugby Football Union Annual Report 2020/21



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In line with the financial constraints in which the IRFU finds itself, because of COVID-19, this year's Annual Report has been designed in-house to ensure minimum costs.
Thank you for your understanding.

Office Bearers and Committee

President	D. Kavanagh		
Vice Presidents	J. Robinson	G. Barrett	
Hon. Treasurer	P.T. Kennedy		
Immediate Past President	N. Comyn		
Chairman Management Committee	D. Madden		
Committee	S.W. Black	S. Carty	
	M.P. Coghlan	M. Collopy	
	R.W. Deacon	K. Dinneen	
	J. Gibson	T. Hennessy	
	B. Humphries	A. Leddy	
	J. McDermott	J.D.H. McKibbin	
	D. Millar	T. O'Beirne	
	J. O'Driscoll	P.A. Orr	
	M. Orr	M. Quinn	
	N. Rynne	J. Sheerin	
World Rugby Board	J. O'Driscoll	P.A. Orr	S. Carty
Six Nations Committee	P. Browne	J. O'Driscoll	
EPCR	P. Browne	M. Kearney	
Celtic Rugby DAC	P. Browne	K. Potts	
Lions	T. Grace	P. Browne	
Rugby Europe	J. O'Driscoll	D. Nucifora	
Trustees	A.R. Dawson	D.V. Healy	
	J.D. Hussey	S.R. Hilditch	
Chief Executive	P. Browne		
National Coach	A. Farrell		

Standing Committees

Management

D. Madden - Chairman, P. Kennedy, J. O'Driscoll, G. Barrett, T. O'Beirne, M. Collopy, D. Kavanagh, J. Robinson, J. McKibbin, N. Rynne (Chairman Designate), Staff - P. Browne, K. Potts, D. Nucifora and S. McNamara.

National Professional Game Board

T. O'Beirne – Chairman, G. Keegan, K. Dinneen, M. Kearney, C. Currid, E. Reddan, Staff – P. Browne and D. Nucifora.

Rugby

G. Barrett- Chairman, M. Quinn, J. McDermott, J. Robinson, J. McKibbin, K. Dinneen, J. Gibson, M.P. Coghlan, Staff – C McEntee, K Beggs and D Philips.

Finance

P. Kennedy - Chairman, A. Leddy, J. Gibson, M.P Coghlan, J. Robinson, F. O'Rourke (co-opted), L. Quinn (co-opted), M. Carton (co-opted), Staff – P. Browne, K. Potts, and C. O'Brien.

Commercial and Marketing

M. Collopy - Chairman, T. O'Beirne, F. Sweeney (co-opted), P. Dean (co-opted), J. Riordan (co-opted) Staff – P. Browne, P. Power and S. McNamara.

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

President's Report

Des Kavanagh

I was greatly honoured when elected the 133rd President of the Irish Rugby Football Union on 23rd October 2020, the first President from my club, Co. Carlow, since its founding in 1873 and the first representative of Youth (Club) Rugby.

The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic to our shores in March 2021 has had a devastating impact on all aspects of our lives. Rugby, like all competitive field sports, has been badly impacted. While we have been lucky to have the TV coverage of our National and Provincial sides, the sight of empty stadia and the financial impact of the lockdown has been horrendous. Planned developments have been replaced by survival strategies.

I want to acknowledge the work of our CEO - Philip Browne, Hon. Treasurer - Patrick Kennedy, and his Finance Committee, Finance Director - Conor O'Brien and his team, for all of their tremendous work in managing the organisation through the worst financial challenge to face the IRFU and the Provinces in our history.

I would also like to acknowledge the work of David Nucifora and his team, Simon Keogh and Rugby Players Ireland and indeed all of our players in working with the Union in the best interests and in the sustainability of the professional game in Ireland.

COVID-19 has meant we have been confined to TV coverage of the International games. After a challenging start to the campaign Ireland enjoyed a successful campaign. Congratulations to Andy Farrell and his coaching team and of course Johnny Sexton and his players.

Regrettably the summer tour to Fiji has had to be cancelled despite the best efforts of all involved. Instead we will welcome Japan and the USA to the Aviva Stadium in games that can allow our Coaches to run the rule over players coming through in the Provinces who may in future put pressure on our current squad.

Our Women's team targeted a top 3 finish in the truncated Six Nations Championship and had great wins over Wales and Italy to finish 3rd. Congratulations to Adam Griggs and Ciara Griffin and the Squad. We look forward to the World Cup Qualifiers later in the year.

The IRFU is committed to building strong foundations to support our ambitions for the future of the Women's game. This commitment was demonstrated in the employment of an additional five Rugby Development Officers and eight Club Community Rugby Officers for the Women's/Girl's game. Prior to the lockdown we were delighted to see the 57% increase in women registered with clubs compared to our last full season in 2019, a 46% increase in youth players and a 29% increase in the number of women's and girl's teams registered in that period. The ALDI Play Rugby Programme has been a great success in bringing young girls into the game.

At the time of writing this report, the U20s have enjoyed two strong victories in their opening two games of the U20s Six Nations in Wales, and the Men's Sevens have achieved a deserved qualification for the Tokyo Olympics, in what has been a highlight of a difficult year for the sport. Congratulations to David Nucifora, Anthony Eddy and everyone involved.

Unfortunately, the senior schools and club U18 players have lost out on the opportunity to play their Senior Cup and U18 Leagues and Cups. Against the background of the human devastation wreaked on Society their loss is minor. However, to those young people who had trained and played in their Schools and Clubs for years and who would have looked forward to their Cups/Championships as the highlight of their Under-Age Rugby careers the loss is immense.

It is said that 'adversity breeds opportunity' and in this regard the various departments of the IRFU have demonstrated commitment and innovation in their efforts to battle the impact of the pandemic in their areas.

The Rugby Department under Colin McEntee has been magnificent in its efforts to keep the game at the forefront of players and coaches' thoughts through the production of some excellent webinars focussed on coach development, referee development and player development.

As the national vaccine programme gets into full flow there is a growing sense of anticipation. Preparations are well advanced in preparation for a return to rugby. Clubs are looking forward to

summer rugby in a variety of formats. At the time of writing, children are back in our clubs in 15 player pods. Adults are about to return in similar pods, the pent-up energy of all concerned is palpable.

Many parents have described the enthusiasm with which their children, including those in Disability and Mixed Ability Rugby, have responded to the return to play. While the national mood is lifting it is undoubtedly the case that the mood of our rugby players at all ages and all levels is also on an upward path.

Many of us had little knowledge of meetings by Microsoft Teams until the onset of the pandemic. We are now proficient in its use. It is likely that in future many meetings will continue to be held virtually. However, there is no doubt but that we all miss the real quality of interaction particular to interpersonal meetings and the debates so easily facilitated in such fora.

In conclusion, I would like to thank my fellow Officers and the Union Committee for their help and support over the season. Hopefully we can all look forward to a more meaningful and more fulfilling season in 2021/22. I would also like to thank Ellen Hanley, Louise Hart and their colleagues for their ongoing help and support to me in my role as President.

Finally, I want to thank my wife, Marie, and my family who have shared my disappointment with the impact of the pandemic and who have continued to maintain a positive outlook for a better future.

Chief Executive's Report

Philip Browne

The extraordinary circumstances created by the COVID-19 virus and its variants continue to dictate how society can behave and sport is no exception in terms of the impact of government restrictions. The IRFU has carefully followed all government guidelines and has worked closely with Sport Ireland and the Governments to plan for the graduated return of participants to rugby at grassroots level and also in terms of the graduated return of spectators to club, provincial and international matches. Whilst all the planning is in place for a gradual return to normality it is all contingent on the COVID situation and on the rollout of what appears to be a very effective national vaccination programme. There is considerable hope now that we can continue to open up the game at grassroots level beyond the limited training allowed at present and importantly there is hope now that pilot events with spectators over the summer months will open the doors of our stadia for sufficient spectators to assist with a financial recovery for the IRFU and Provinces.

Whilst there has been little activity to report on the pitch for the club and schools game until the latest easing of restrictions in the past few weeks, you will read later in this report of the significant level of activity that has been going on off the pitch by Colin McEntee and his colleagues in the Rugby Department. The use of technology to deliver informative webinars to all parts of the club game from athletes, administrators, coaches and referees has been impressive as has been the take up for these webinars and courses, demonstrating the continued interest and demand for the game and its offerings. This has required a huge commitment by staff, working in difficult circumstances and against a back-drop of uncertainty and continuous changing timelines. This effort is matched by those in our Clubs and Provinces and these efforts hopefully will ensure that grassroots rugby emerges from this period of huge uncertainty in good shape.

The professional game at Provincial and International level has been able to continue thanks to the efforts of the players, coaches and staff who have had to deal with the most restrictive conditions. The alignment and buy-in from all involved has allowed each Province and the National Team to establish robust high performance "bubbles" in which they can safely operate and as a result they have managed to complete a season and fixture list of sorts which has been important to stem some of the financial losses that would have occurred if the season and tournaments had been abandoned. Mention should be made of Dr. Rod McLoughlin, IRFU Medical Director, and the team monitoring the

application of COVID protocols. They have worked tirelessly to ensure that the COVID protocols have been implemented properly and that the integrity of our COVID response is maintained. Rod McLoughlin sits on the Sport Ireland Expert Group that advises on all matters relating to COVID and sport and has been instrumental in setting policy across all sports in this regard.

Provincial Team Tournaments

One of the difficulties faced by tournament organisers and participating teams has been the continuous uncertainty and changing circumstances due to COVID and associated travel restrictions and protocols. The IRFU and Provinces are in a state of continuous scenario planning, trying to second guess and stay ahead of restrictions imposed by COVID. This has seen tournament uncertainty with the final pool rounds of the European Champions and Challenge Cups cancelled and moving to a truncated tournament with knock out rounds. In the PRO14 the hope was that four South African teams could be included post-Christmas in the “Rainbow Cup” and there was a significant amount of planning to try and make that happen but ultimately travel restrictions and quarantine regulations made this impossible and so the PRO14 has had an unsatisfactory final block to the season. However, with the year of disruption it was satisfying that a final did take place with Benetton taking the honours for Europe.

International Teams

At international level the uncertainty has been equally difficult to manage and credit to David Nucifora and his team in High Performance who have had to deal with planning against constantly moving targets in terms of fixtures for all our international teams. Travel restrictions made it impossible for the planned fixtures involving southern hemisphere teams in Europe in November. In addition, there was the small matter of completing the postponed matches of the 2020 Guinness Six Nations. A huge amount of planning went in to ensuring that firstly the postponed Six Nations matches took place and these were successfully held and completed – in Ireland’s case a home match against Scotland and an away match against France. Much more complicated was arranging fixtures to replace the normal November fixture list and credit to Ben Morel and the Six Nations team who co-ordinated a hastily arranged Guinness Autumn Nations Cup involving Fiji and Georgia and the Six Nations teams. There were difficulties because of a COVID outbreak in the Fiji camp and two fixtures were lost as a result but it was a success in the sense that it provided an important opportunity for the international teams and ensured that some revenues were generated.

The Women's team had a very busy Autumn planned with Rugby World Cup 2021 qualification matches involving Spain, Scotland, and Italy. Unfortunately, COVID restrictions created havoc, made more difficult to cope with given the athletes are not full-time and have jobs outside rugby. It proved impossible to stage the qualification matches despite several contingencies being planned for and it was not until World Rugby postponed the RWC2021 to autumn 2022 that the pressure came off with qualification series put back to later in 2021 which hopefully will be manageable. There were also difficulties with the Women's Six Nations stemming from quarantine regulations which would have been impossible for part-time athletes to manage. A truncated format was used in April to play off a Tournament which was very effective and provided the women's team with playing opportunities denied to them for so long.

The difficulties continue as the summer tour to Fiji had to be cancelled despite a huge effort put in by David Nucifora, World Rugby, and Fiji to make it happen. A COVID outbreak in Fiji in April meant that the tour was no longer practical and summer fixtures in Ireland against Japan and USA have now been arranged for July.

Sevens rugby has not been immune either with tournaments cancelled or proving impossible to participate in because of COVID restrictions. Throughout the disruption the sevens continued their preparations, and despite a year of uncertainty the Men's Sevens team overcame hosts France in the final game of the repechage event in Monaco to reach their programme goal of qualification for the Tokyo Olympics. This was a deserved reward for the work put into the programme by everyone involved. The team will carry the support of the entire nation, and we wish them, and all the athletes that make up Team Ireland, the very best at the Tokyo games. Putting the Sevens programme into this spotlight will allow the IRFU to showcase the Sevens opportunity to more young boys and girls, as we look to capitalise on what is a huge showcase for the game.

World Rugby cancelled the 2021 U20 World Championship and so the Six Nations have moved the Six Nations U20 tournament in that slot in June, playing a tournament format in Wales. This is hugely important in terms of player development and hopefully the planning that has gone into this rearranged schedule will pay off. At the time of writing the team have recorded victories over Scotland (38-7) and Wales (40-12).

Financial Impacts

The theme here is one of continuous scenario planning and flexible responsiveness to the impositions and impact of COVID. This has not just been confined to the Rugby and High-Performance side of the organisation but has also manifested itself across the board. The financial implications of COVID were reflected in the 2020 accounts which showed a loss of €35m. A huge effort has been put in by the IRFU and Provinces alike to manage the potentially disastrous financial situation, under the guiding eye of the Hon. Treasurer Patrick Kennedy and Finance Director, Conor O'Brien. Forecast loss of revenue for 2021 amounts to €39m for the four Provinces and the IRFU with another estimated loss of €6m in the club game as per 2020. These sorts of losses cannot be sustained without Government support and in November 2020 the Government stepped in with a rescue package of €18m, of which €4m was directed to the club game and the balance of €14m used to help the Provinces and the IRFU continue to operate. The IRFU is hugely grateful to the Government and Sport Ireland for this assistance which dealt with the problems of 2020 and there are discussions with Government for further assistance in 2021. A review of the longer term finances completed in December made it clear that the losses sustained by the IRFU could not be sustained and an immediate and permanent reduction of 10% was required to the IRFU cost base, mirrored by similar reductions in the Provinces. This is predicated by a return of 100% of spectator capacity by 2022 or further cost reductions will be required. This decision required difficult decisions around our staff who have been working on basis of 20% reduction in salary from July to December 2020 and 10% salary reduction from January 2021 to July 2021. A voluntary redundancy programme and compulsory redundancy programme just completed has resulted in a loss of 19 staff in addition to non-renewal of contracts for certain positions over the past twelve months. This is reflected in similar programmes across the Provinces. The role of HR Director, Aileen Bailey and the HR Department has been critical in managing the implications of what was a difficult decision.

Organisational Impacts

The financial implications of COVID have not been confined to the non-playing staff and it should be acknowledged that Rugby Players Ireland and the professional playing staff have also taken voluntary salary reductions of 10%. The players have also accepted that longer term contracts in the current financial climate are problematic for the IRFU and Provinces and that there is inevitably a market adjustment given the current circumstances. There has been regular briefing and dialogue with Rugby Players Ireland to ensure that they are informed and understand the nature of the difficulties facing the IRFU and to find means of working together to address them for the benefit of all.

Business Continuation

On the revenue side it has obviously been very challenging and Commercial and Marketing Director, Pdraig Power, has been diligent in working closely with our sponsors and partners to keep them abreast of the situation and to find ways to ensure that they continue to get value from their relationship with the IRFU. He has also secured some new partnerships which is a great achievement in the difficult circumstances. Our thanks to our sponsors for their continued support and forbearance.

Despite COVID there have been other important activities taking place in the background. Firstly, the important work of the Governance Working Party has reached a final stage with its recommendations accepted by the IRFU Committee. The changes to the Laws of the Union will be put to a Special Meeting of the IRU Council in June and if accepted will bring IRFU governance in to line with the “good governance” guidelines laid down by Sport Ireland and will ensure that IRFU governance is fit for purpose. This will be a step along the road for the IRFU as it contemplates the need to move from being an unincorporated member organisation to being incorporated with the benefit of limited liability.

Another significant milestone was the conclusion of negotiations between CVC and the Six Nations for sale of a $\frac{1}{7}$ th share in Six Nations. This will deliver to the IRFU over a five-year period some £40m with a further £8m contingent on certain commercial targets being met. These monies must be viewed as future revenues paid up-front and as such how they are used for the benefit of the game in Ireland will need to be carefully considered. Whilst agreement has been reached with CVC, completion of the deal will require regulatory approval of various competition authorities. There are some significant opportunities for the game in this relationship, not least the role of CVC in helping align the interests of its various “rugby” properties in the shape of PRL, PRO14 and Six Nations. Their experience in professional sport and their focus on commercial performance and brand building will help move Six Nations along the spectrum to being a world class tournament and organisation.

Global Developments

Work continues in terms of trying to restructure the global season to provide more meaningful competition in the July and November international playing windows. It is a very complicated process which has to take account of some key criteria including protection and improvement of player welfare, uplift in commercial values, meaningful competition that includes “Tier 2” teams whilst respecting the constraints imposed during a Lions Tour year and a RWC year. Key to agreement is

ensuring that the outcome is not a “zero sum” solution, i.e., that the solution does not deliver winners but only at the expense of others from a high performance and commercial point of view. It is hoped that discussions between Six Nations and SANZAR will help bring this to a conclusion by the end of 2021 with introduction of new competitions in 2024.

In conclusion, it has been an extraordinary year due to COVID and the threat to Irish Rugby has not diminished but we are hopeful that the current national vaccination programme will allow society and our sport to gradually return to normal. We cannot take anything for granted yet but we will continue to work to our goal of the return for vibrant grassroots activity on and off the pitch in our schools and clubs and for return of spectators in the professional game which will secure our financial underpinning of the game. My thanks to volunteers and committee members at all levels of the game for the efforts that have been put into ensuring the game survives COVID and in particular I want to thank Chief Operating Officer, Kevin Potts, the IRFU senior management team of Directors and the four Provincial CEOs along with the IRFU staff for their commitment and loyalty over what has been a most difficult period.

Ireland Teams

National Men’s XV

The rescheduled fixtures of the 2020 Guinness Six Nations Championship took place in October with Ireland recording a victory over Italy (50-17) and a loss to France (27-35) in Paris resulting in a third-place finish in the tournament.

The Autumn Nations Cup took place across November and December with Ireland beating Wales (32-9), Georgia (23-10) and Scotland (31-16) but lost to England (7-18).

Paul O’Connell was added to the coaching group ahead of the 2021 Guinness Six Nations where Ireland lost their opening two fixtures against Wales (16-21) and France (13-15) but won their three remaining games against Italy (48-10), Scotland (27-24) and England (32-18) to again finish third.

A summer tour to Fiji was planned for July which has been cancelled, home fixtures against the USA and Japan now taking its place.

National Women's XVs

The National Programme has probably had more false starts and rescheduling of tournaments and matches than any other programme during the COVID pandemic.

The squad were preparing for the WRWC Qualification process that was to be held in 2020 and ultimately got moved again on several occasions to now being played, possibly in September 2021. Added to this came the announcement from World Rugby that the WRWC will also be postponed to late 2022.

However, the programme did manage to play a remodelled Six Nations Championship in April 2021 and after some 20 Training Camps with no international rugby the group managed to demonstrate some improvement and show an increase in depth across the camps and Championship. The team had good wins against both Wales (0-45) and Italy (25-5), however we were not successful against France (15-56).

Several players won new caps during this campaign which is pleasing as the competition for selection continues with more players being introduced to the squad and several younger players showing a good rate of improvement and the ability to play at this level.

Ireland Age-grade Programmes

U20 - Six Nations 2021

COVID has impacted heavily on the Ireland 20s programme this season. An initial selection camp was held in December 2020 before the Six Nations was postponed in January 2021 until the summer window of June and July. A squad of 32 players and 12 management, led by coach Richie Murphy, will represent Ireland over the five games from the 19th of June to the 13th of July.

JWC 2021

World Rugby made the decision back in September 2020 to cancel the JWC for 2021. Discussions will recommence over the coming months regarding the 2022 edition of the championships.

U19

Due to COVID restrictions the National U19 programme was cancelled this season.

U18 Six Nations Festival – Paris 2021

For the second year in a row the U18 Nations Festival due to be held in Paris during April was cancelled due to COVID restrictions.

U18 Clubs AND Schools

Due to COVID restrictions the National U18 Clubs and Schools programme was cancelled this season.

National Talent Squad

The NTS has undergone a period of review over the past 12 months. Several alterations to the programme have taken place, most crucially in the areas of alignment, language, and resourcing. Currently there are 65 identified players representing the four provinces across a three-year age bracket participating in the programme.

7s Programme

The Men's and Women's 7s World Series had several tournaments postponed and even the Olympics were postponed to 2021 because of COVID.

Both programmes continued to train and prepare. However, there have been several false starts with tournaments continuing to be cancelled or postponed throughout the season.

The men's 7s programme managed to play a domestic series with the four Provincial Academies and this was beneficial preparation for the Olympic Repechage Tournament in Monaco where the team secured qualification for the Tokyo Olympics.

Several members of the women's squad were integrated into the Women's XV's preparations for the WRWC Qualification process and the Six Nations which proved to be very successful and provide some players with some valuable game time.

The introduction of several new players to both squads and the tournaments to be played later in 2021 will provide some valuable experience to the squads in preparation for the 2022 Season and qualification for the 7s Rugby World Cup.

High Performance Centre 2020

2020 saw the debut of Six Nations Training Schedule during January to March – all National Teams training under 1 roof – headcount of 250+ using the facility daily. Usage of the facility by all High-Performance departments – sharing of resources and knowledge, there was over 17 different users accessing the facility since its opening. In January 2020, we opened the HPC Performance Kitchen headed up by Maurice McGeehan – Performance Chef. Meal plans for all Squads are now prepared daily on site.

At the end of March 2020 until end of July 2020 the HPC was closed due to the COVID Pandemic. The Centre reopened on August 4th and since then have implemented numerous COVID policies and processes, which have been rolled out across all teams using the HPC facility. The COVID strategy has ensured the game of rugby can remain sustainable and that all teams can operate within their bubbles. The Centre operated throughout the year, hosting teams and meeting in line with best practice across the pandemic.

Referees

The resumption of PRO14 and EPCR fixtures was welcomed by everyone with Chris Busby joining Andy Brace, Frank Murphy, and Sean Gallagher in refereeing within the competitions. This also coincided with Joy Neville being appointed to TMO in PRO14, EPCR and WR fixtures including her first appointment within the Six Nations. An additional challenge presented by COVID-19 was the requirement to utilise a smaller number of match officials. This meant that our High-Performance Referees and High-Performance Development Group were kept very busy with games while also meeting the needs of COVID-19 protocols and all requirements associated. In addition to these two groups some members of our National Panel, Associations and Society stepped up to help week in and week out to help keep the games going which we are very grateful for.

Under the watchful eye of our High-Performance Referee Coach (Johnny Lacey) this group of referees, development referees and TMOs continue to deliver a high standard of performance which reflects their hard work and commitment to the roles they fulfil. Season 2020/21 also saw George Clancy retire after a very successful career.

Performance Analysis

Men's National Team

The senior men's team analysis systems and processes were restructured for 2020 with three analysts for 6N20/6N21 aligned to two coaches each. A working group is now established between national team analysts worldwide heading towards alignment of sharing and minimum standards in stadia. An internal IRFU game intelligence project is launched and ongoing, mapping the changing trends and traits across all top-level opposition worldwide leading towards RWC2023.

Our internal data has up to 14 registered rugby data collectors working on all pro games. Alignment is now achieved between club/country/academy through the IRFU Data Centre (comparable data collected across all). Games are fully coded and sent to provinces within eight hours of final whistle, or before 8a.m. for late kick-offs. This fully IRFU funded initiative allows provincial analysts concentrate on rugby analysis and away from data collection.

Women's and 7s - A coder (data collection) from our Rugby Data Centre was assigned to the team for consistency of coding across all games. A backend database has been developed, housing all Opta Rugby 7s data with an accessible dashboard built in Tableau catering for multiple team and individual analysis. The process to transition IRFU 7s archive in place for change of analysts in August 2021 is nearing completion. Alignment of 7s/HPU coding has been developed for academy players when playing in the 7s game.

High Performance Centre (HPC) - The analysis system at the HPC is now fully operational – 11 joystick-controlled cameras covering multi-angle capture all pitches and indoor training area.

Academies- There are several new academy analyst appointments incoming (Munster and Connacht) and alignment has continued among analysts in opposing provinces. An analyst has been appointed to the U20s for the upcoming Six Nations in Wales. Individual analysts are now working closer to individual pathway players to upskill in analysis workflows before going into senior camps.

Athletic Performance

The 2020/21 season has presented significant challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather than dwelling on factors outside of our control, Irish Rugby Leadership took swift and direct action to ensure the longevity of our sport and those that play it. Within the Athletic Performance department, this required us to quickly mobilize protocols, equipment, and entire gyms to meet internal and external

COVID regulations. In collaboration with relevant stakeholders across our Interdisciplinary Teams (IDT), we have been able to get the following solutions actioned:

1. A central GPS system that integrates on-feet, running data from every academy, senior, and national player in the country. This automated system allows a coach on the ground to upload their GPS data daily (guided by agreed National Standards) and then view that data online using a bespoke set of dashboards. This system is now used by every province, with the national team exclusively using it to manage all GPS data in camp.
2. A central Strength/Power system that integrates all primary strength related data from every pathway, academy, senior, and national player in the country. This data, which is anchored to national benchmarks for strength lifts, provides coaches with real-time feedback on players strength exposure and volume load, ensuring players are receiving adequate stimulus across the season.
3. We completed a longitudinal study in partnership with University of South Wales on the role of hip strength and lower-limb injuries. The findings revealed key insights pertaining to the development and interplay between hamstring and groin strength.
4. We filmed and have now shared 190+ IRFU branded videos demonstrating the movements we believe every rugby player should be proficient in. This movement literacy inspired project arms coaches and players across the country with video references for how we expect a player to move. This will inform programming and education deep into the pathway.

These projects represent a prioritized sample of the work our athletic performance staff have contributed to over the last 12 months.

IQ Rugby

IQ Rugby's work like all other aspects of the business has been greatly impacted by the effects of the global pandemic. This has resulted in limited face to face support of identified athletes and a greater focus on remote support.

The IQ Rugby talent identification and development programme continues to be underpinned by the wider network of Irish rugby diaspora which includes the IRFU Exiles. It is from these strong links that many of the young Irish Qualified athletes are first identified.

The IQ Rugby programme, has again, this year, seen a number male and female IQ athletes selected to the various national Age Grade and senior XV's and Sevens squad as well as new IQ players recruited into Provincial Academy programmes.

In parallel to the 'on-field' development, the IQ Rugby Scholarship Awards Scheme has again, proven to be a real positive point of difference in both attracting and supporting young student athletes to play and study in Ireland.

Provincial Teams

As described earlier in the report the Provinces bore the brunt of the difficulties imposed by COVID restrictions. Having said that great credit is due to the players, coaches, and administrators in successfully navigating their way through a complicated and at time disjointed season. The four provincial teams once again proved their dominance in the PRO14, Leinster and Ulster finishing first and second in Conference A and Munster and Connacht filling the top two positions in Conference B. Leinster overcame Munster in the final to win another PRO14 title.

In Europe all four provinces were involved in the Champions Cup which unfortunately had to be truncated in the pool stages due COVID restrictions. Leinster and Munster were placed in an extended last round of 16 teams in the Champions Cup and Ulster and Connacht dropped down to the knockout rounds of the Challenge Cup. Leinster secured a hard-fought quarter final win over Exeter ultimately going down to La Rochelle in a semi-final, Munster having been knocked out in the extended last round by Toulouse. In the Challenge Cup, Ulster progressed to the Semi-Finals, ultimately knocked out by Leicester and Connacht did not make it beyond the extended round of 16 teams, knocked out at that stage by Leicester.

Rugby Development Department

The IRFU Rugby Development Department priority, is to provide a positive Rugby experience by ensuring that it is a transformational environment for all; improving the players experience of playing,

Spirit of rugby, coaching, refereeing and athletic development, as well as supporting and training our volunteers and staff. This has never been more critical as we re-emerge from the pandemic in revitalising our players, volunteers, and game.

On March 12th, 2020 the IRFU suspended all team sport activity with immediate effect due to concerns over COVID-19. A week later, as the reality of COVID-19 took hold, the IRFU became the first Irish NGB of a leading field sport to fully conclude its domestic calendar. The 2020/21 season is facing a similar fate and two seasons in a row without the chance for our players, coaches, referees, and volunteers to complete their respective competitions. The love and enjoyment of sport comes not from training for games but playing and supporting them.

The IRFU Rugby Department created an essential COVID-19 Team to be agile, proactive, and committed, to ensure all our information, guidance, and direction, supports the safe return of all our stakeholders.

To support our Clubs during this cessation, the IRFU launched a significant number of webinars, guidelines, and policies to support a safe and positive return to rugby activity. In addition, the IRFU supported our Clubs through the, Club Continuity Fund, Personal Protective Equipment, and the Government COVID-19 Emergency Fund. The purpose of these initiatives was to ensure that the Rugby Club would be able to resume operations once public health measures eased.

Following almost 15 months of a constant struggle, in an environment dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic, we are at last beginning to see some light at the end of the tunnel. As the Governments implement the vaccination programme, we live in the hope that this will bring about a return to some form of normality and rugby at last!

Age Grade and Third Level

Pre COVID-19, we saw the highest ever participation numbers at Mini Rugby with 27,245 participants across the four provinces. Although we don't have any hard data from this season, anecdotally numbers were very healthy again and there has even been some recruitment of newcomers due to the non-contact diktat for much of the season.

Unfortunately, due to COVID-19, the traditional provincial and national blitzes which normally see 300 participants across six events, did not occur. In conjunction with the Coach Education Department the

laws and regulations for mini rugby were reviewed. From this, a Positive Behaviours Programme was suggested and will be created and rolled-out throughout the season and it was agreed to allow for children to start non-contact mini rugby at age five (previously a child had to be six).

Under the challenge of lockdown and non-contact training, the IRFU have provided online session plans and content for mini rugby coaches to use through the *Level Up* and the *Ready for Rugby* programmes. This initiative is ongoing and has facilitated the retention and recruitment of under 12 players across the country.

The IRFU Age-Grade Committees have met consistently over the period and have undertaken several initiatives: governance and eligibility guidelines. An IRFU Youth Council delegate now attends meetings and relays the information directly from the participants.

The 2020/21 season kicked off with great enthusiasm and caution. There was a gradual return to matches in September with provinces opting for localised friendly fixtures. Furthermore, Clubs and Schools took additional precautions and staggered the return to matches for different teams/age-bands in September. Unfortunately, this was as good as it got and there has been very limited participation due to COVID but there is the hope that some training and fixtures will occur in what would be a prolonged season leading into the summer months.

Participation numbers and teams have been consistently growing across third level for the past number of seasons, helped in no small part due to the relationship with Student Sport Ireland. Despite all the uncertainty, 20 men's and 14 women's teams had committed to participating in leagues until lockdown was re-instated.

The IRFU also engaged with SSI hosted Third Level NGB Workshops and offered the IRFU Affiliate Referee Course and Coaching Courses to students on-line.

Women's Rugby

Due to COVID-19 on pitch activities continued to be greatly impacted for the 2020/21 season. In the early stages of the season the Women's AIL clubs were integrated into the more regionalised Energia Community Series. The series did manage to commence but unfortunately with changes in the public health advice the season had to understandably be abandoned.

The Canterbury Give It A Try programme was also impacted but did run in a reduce format in the Summer of 2020 and played a role in the reopening of Clubs. Support was provided to Clubs via online workshops prior to the roll out of the programme informing all participants of COVID-19 guidelines and best practices to ensure participant safety.

There was also no opportunity to run the U18's and Senior Interprovincial at both 15's and 7's or the schools X7's programme.

While there were no on pitch activities the opportunity arose to continue to connect with coaches and players online. This led to a number of female only initiatives being introduced namely *SPARK* and *IGNITE*. These were two online player development programmes which gave players, at both senior and U18's, information in areas such as nutrition, strength and conditioning, game development as well as player insights on their journey to the green jersey. Over 800 players registered for the programmes and benefited from follow up practical resources to continue their development as well as the ability to re-watch the series.

Development work with the Women's AIL coaches also continued online in conjunction with IRFU coaching department. Following feedback from the coaches there were six sessions covering topics like team attack and defence, leadership, coaching pedagogy, and laws of the game.

International Women's Day on March 8th saw a *LiveWIRE* lunch time webinar celebrating Women in Rugby and how their contributions to rugby have changed during the pandemic. Eimear Considine hosted the event and was joined by Ireland teammate Emily Lane, Connacht President Anne Heneghan and Su Carty IRFU Union Committee and World Rugby Council member.

To prepare for the return to rugby the first Women's AIL Forum was held (virtually) with a follow up Forum planned once further clarification is received on the easing of restrictions.

Coach Development

Coach development through the 2020/21 season has endured ongoing restrictions and impacted the delivery and engagement through normal channels, limiting access to games, training and ultimately our coaches. This has provided the department and staff across the provinces with an unprecedented opportunity to innovate and develop flexible modes and styles of delivery, whilst maintaining engagement with coaches across the country. This season saw 36 formal coach education courses

delivered to over 1,300 coaches. In addition, we continued our support for World Rugby's training and education programmes, with our staff delivering and attending the World Rugby trainer and educator course alongside continued support for Rugby Europe's coach education programme.

IRFU coach education continues to evolve, providing an enhanced ongoing learning experience for our coaches. During the last year work has continued in the development and use of technological solutions in supporting our coaches through the IRFU online learning platform Gainline, while integrating with the IRFU data management platform Rugby Connect. These developments will enable coaches to connect with Clubs and Schools, whilst also providing recognition for ongoing learning and development.

Coach development programmes across the country continue to serve the needs of coaches delivering at all levels of the game from mini to professional. The use of technology has been accelerated and delivery has been adapted, allowing us to connect and continue to engage this season with the provision of over 250 workshops and webinars, connecting with over 7,500 coaches across the country.

Supporting the development of the female game and in particular female coaches has continued this season with specific development programmes and workshops in both the age grade and adult game. Alongside bespoke workshops for coaches within the Women's AIL, additional workshops comprised of the following: nutrition, athletic and player development, game specific components, leadership and learning science amongst others.

Communication and promotion of coaching across all levels of the game has remained a priority with a specific focus on showcasing female coaches. Integration of various departments in delivering game development initiatives has been to the fore, with collaborative work facilitating learning opportunities to benefit coaches and players across all levels of the game.

Referees Development

The 2020/21 season presented many new challenges. With no rugby available to referee the department went about continuing to deliver on the educational programmes while also engaging with all members of the Associations and Society. Over the course of the season over 130 virtual workshops were held with a combined attendance of over 6,700. In addition to the educational programme there were several Webinars held:

- IRFU Professional Referees each delivered a series of webinars in each province across the key areas of the game. These webinars took place over four separate nights the referees moving province each night.
- A trilogy of webinars was then planned to help referees further develop their self and game management skills to ultimately improve their enjoyment and effectiveness on the pitch. These webinars included:
 - A Sports Psychologist to present on “Mental Skills in Rugby Refereeing”.
 - A leading GAA Referee presented on the experience of refereeing within the GAA.
 - The final part addressed “A referee’s mindset”.

The new developments using our educational platform Gainline will make a big difference to our programmes and accessibility to courses and educational material including the roll out of a new evaluation process. Our team of Referee Development Managers working under David Wilkinson (National Referee Manager) continue to deliver excellent results and despite the challenges of COVID-19 recruited a very healthy number of new referees who will now start refereeing next season.

Participation Rugby

The CCROs programme, have been paused for over 15 months now (12th March 2020).

Before COVID-19, we had strong numbers with over 140,000 school children engaged in CCROs Rugby programmes achieved through the employment of seasonal CCROs, by establishing ¹Club and School links through the deployment of the ²Play Rugby Programme.

Given that Rugby has not been played in over 15 months, it will be more vital than ever that IRFU have the workforce ready to engage and revitalise our Clubs and Schools, immediately on return.

Operationally, the first phase starts with CCROs fully reactivating our game in Clubs. The second phase focuses on relationships with Clubs/Schools links by training volunteers with the aim to educate and enhance the Rugby playing experience of players/students, teachers/coaches, and parents.

The ***IRFU’s Tag Rugby programme*** was played in 14 venues despite the pandemic and those Clubs that were not able to restart it this year have confirmed their interest in remaining part of this very successful programme. Due to reductions in national operational budget and compulsory

redundancies within the national participation team, Provinces will now have full autonomy and ownership of the future Tag Rugby programme. All four Provinces welcome Tag as a great opportunity to grow the game.

The **IRFU Touch Rugby programme** which is proudly sponsored by Lucozade continues to have a very positive partnership with the **Irish Touch Association** who lend their expertise to the Touch Rugby Programmes. In the past year, we have agreed a strategy for the development of the game. Touch rugby will be played in Clubs, Schools and Universities.

The **IRFU Aldi Play Rugby programme** continues to go from strength to strength and despite the pandemic forcing Schools to close for large portions of the academic year. The programme had over 50,000 participants engaged in face to face sessions despite a massively reduced amount of community rugby staff on the ground. 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 year, three new tenets were added to the programme to increase sustainability and to allow teachers to be empowered to deliver their own programmes. The first one being 'Aldi Play Rugby Virtual Sessions' where teachers through the medium of Microsoft teams get support from rugby officers pre, during and post sessions. Secondly, 'Aldi Play Rugby Class Lessons' is an opportunity to fully embed rugby during core curriculum subjects. Finally, the 'Aldi Play Rugby Rugbyathon' allows Schools to be active in their class bubbles over the course of the day whilst also raising money for local charities.

The value and role of our volunteers and staff (CCROs) is priceless, as both play active roles as frontline workers driving energy and life back into lungs and hearts of our game.

Technology

RugbyConnect, the IRFU's new Competition and Game Management System, was launched for the beginning of the 2020/21 season. RugbyConnect allows for member self-registration across all Clubs in Ireland as well as allowing for Club, provincial and IRFU administration. Currently we have 86,785 active members registered in RugbyConnect and we are expecting a rise in these figures as we see rugby Clubs and Schools reopen their gates in the coming weeks. There are currently 13,897 active adult players, 22,310 youth players and 3,910 mini players in the system. The remaining memberships are School's players, coaches, referees, and non-playing members. Our attendance tracking module, used by 59 Clubs this season, shows 75,010 attendances to rugby sessions from the 1st of July 2020.

RugbyConnect provides opportunities for Clubs and Schools to avail of panel creations, session planning, attendance tracking and health declaration submissions and reports. The system now houses the management of safeguarding applications as well as the transfers and dual process and many membership reports

School's player registration and competition management is also now added to RugbyConnect. Third level player registration will be added next season. Participation rugby events such as Tag Rugby competitions and the GIAT programme are also being ran through RugbyConnect in the coming months. We will also be linking coaching qualifications from Gainline with coaching members within RugbyConnect to allow for accurate reporting of our coaches.

Energia All Ireland League

Given the public health situation, in July 2020 the IRFU Rugby Committee made the decision to create a split season where teams would play the first half of the season within their provinces, which saw the creation of the Energia Community Series (ECS). The top four placed teams from each province would then contest an Energia Bateman Cup/Plate/Bowl/Shield competition which would see a national element to the competition. A reduced Energia All Ireland League of nine rounds was then planned to commence in January 2021.

The ECS as it became known kicked off on 25th September 2020 but unfortunately only ran for three weeks before public health measures meant it could not continue. In that time several games were called off due to COVID-19 issues resulting in some Clubs not being able to play at all. This was disappointing as provincial and local rivalries looked set to provide a welcome stimulus to the start of the season and even though only three weeks were able to be played, the games that were able to go ahead provided much needed rugby for the teams.

Life was equally difficult for the Energia Women's All Ireland League teams who were facing the first year of the expanded WAIL competition which would have seen ten teams participating. A similar ECS style of competition was formulated but COVID-19 restrictions meant that many matches were affected with minimal rugby played.

Despite the problems and obstacles that seemed to regularly crop up to impede a return to the game, full credit must be given to the players, coaches and volunteers who committed to undertaking the

extra work imposed on them as clubs sought to reopen in anticipation that some rugby would be permitted. So many people played their part as they helped to get their Clubs up and running and this is recognised and appreciated.

Following on from the positive AIL Forums operated over the last two years for AIL Clubs, April 2021 saw the Provincial and Club representatives come together in the first virtual Forums as we look ahead to next season. The same week saw the first WAIL Forum convened which saw the WAIL representatives coming together in another virtual meeting. These Forums are a vital part of the communication process between the IRFU and the 60 AIL Clubs and see positive contributions from all concerned as we look forward to season 2021/22.

Spirit of Rugby

Throughout COVID-19 updated technology and remote learning allowed several Spirit activities to continue.

Safeguarding

A new online vetting system was introduced in September and with the help of Teams online training sessions and electronic user guides, 200 clubs are active on the system. While processing of applications dropped between January and March 2021 there are now over 2,400 coaches and volunteers in the system. The safeguarding training was updated and moved online with a rugby specific course now available to all volunteers working with children and has been integrated into specific parts of coaching youth awards. It allows volunteers to complete some elements remotely while coming together for crucial learning on coaching practices that creates the safe and fun environment necessary for age-grade development.

The IRFU Youth Council published the results of consultations with age-grade players as a toolkit for Clubs in September, <https://www.irishrugby.ie/playing-the-game/spirit-of-rugby/youth-council/>. They expanded the Council with a provincial focus and now has 22 members, several becoming active on provincial committees and sub committees. They also began work on their next project; the creation of a Youth Volunteer Award (for players 17-24 years of age), now in its pilot phase and will be ready as a set of online training modules for the forthcoming season.

Anti-Doping

Testing under strict protocols continued by both Sport Ireland and World Rugby but on a smaller scale. With reduced fixtures there was minimum in-competition testing and to ensure safety of players and testers with restricted travel and visits to homes, less out of competition tests were completed.

19 anti-doping workshops were held in 2020, 12 face-to-face and seven online, reaching over 300 players. Workshops were curtailed with less age-grade programmes taking place and the focus was ensuring tested players had the necessary information to adhere to guidance and regulations.

Disability

Limited rugby took place, but three new Clubs were formed, disability inclusion training was moved online, and a plan created for rugby for players with sensory impairments based on the results of a survey undertaken in November. A Disability and Inclusion Officer was appointed in June 2020 and the focus has been on updating coaching and Club resources to include an expanded rugby programme for players with a disability.

Leadership

Year 3 of the Spirit of Rugby Leadership did not take place and a female specific version of the programme planned for May 2020 was also cancelled. However, a group of 16 female graduates of the Spirit Leadership programme came together to devise a plan to recruit and retain more female leaders in Clubs across all aspects of the game. This 'Leadership in Action' plan will be published in June 2021 for implementation in the 2021/22 season and will work alongside the IRFU Women in Rugby action plan.

Health and Well-Being

A partnership was announced with Jigsaw and Sport Ireland Coaching on World Mental Health Day 10th October 2020 with an online coaching module piloted with youth coaches, <https://www.irishrugby.ie/2020/10/10/irfu-partners-with-jigsaw-to-promote-youth-mental-health>. This module will now become part of the volunteer education online programme. Similar modules are being developed on anti-bullying with ISPCC and NSPCC.

Commercial and Marketing

The Commercial and Marketing function of the IRFU has been extremely busy in what continues to be a very demanding set of circumstances.

Commercial and Marketing Chairman, Michael Collopy has had a challenging first year to contend with. However, he, along with the department has performed very strongly in trying to generate revenue and maintain relationships during this pandemic.

With no crowds permissible in stadia for matches due to COVID restrictions, International match days for both our Women and Men's Teams have continued to be delivered across our valued TV partner platforms.

Viewership figures for our Autumn Nations Cup, the replayed Italy Guinness Six Nations 2020 match and the most recent Guinness Six Nations 2021, for both the women's and men's competitions, have all remained very strong and in most cases have increased.

This past season has challenged us to innovate and to remain business agile while demanding us to present our Irish rugby brands in exciting and new ways across all our platforms. We have done this in conjunction with our exceptional commercial partners and sponsors who continued to stand shoulder to shoulder with us. We thank them all.

We thank the CEO of Vodafone, Anne O'Leary, and her team for their continued support and promotion of our game. Canterbury have also continued to provide financial support and exceptional kit for our teams, and we are delighted to announce the newly Canterbury sponsored 'Give It A Try' grassroots girls rugby programme aimed at recruiting more girls ages 8-14 in to the game during the summer period.

We thank Diageo, whom we have re-signed as our official beer partner and who remain title sponsors of the Guinness Six Nations.

The Aviva Stadium remains the iconic home and fortress for Irish rugby, and even though the stands were unfortunately empty, some great rugby at the venue was witnessed by millions across the world. I thank Aviva for their continued support.

I would also like to pay tribute to VW who will be moving on as our official car partner. They have made a substantial and important contribution to the game in Ireland.

The Energia sponsored 'Your Club, Your Country' IRFU Grand Draw has seen over €4m raised for the club game over the past six years and this year the draw took place online raising over €500,000 for the club game. Despite the cancellation of the Energia AIL, we thank and congratulate Energia for their support as we look forward to the forthcoming season, the 30-year anniversary of the AIL.

To all of our partners including Aer Lingus, PwC, Aldi, Blackrock Expert Services, Aon, Lucozade Sport, Dove Men + Care, Specsavers, Eden Park, DHL Express, Gilbert and all our suppliers, I thank you for your continued support in these trying times.

Attendances at matches in Aviva Stadium remains an imperative financial performance indicator and a key promotional opportunity for Irish Rugby. Sadly, under government restrictions, our Patrons Club and Corporate box holders have, like us all, be unable to attend matches.

You remain a hugely valued and integral part of the Irish rugby family and I thank you warmly. Without your continued support, we cannot deliver rugby in Ireland to this level. We are working hard with the authorities to bring supporters back into the stadium once it becomes safe to do so. We remain hopeful that that day will come soon.

Communications

Over the past seven years the IRFU has put in place a digital communications strategy that has seen it grow to be one of the most engaged sports in Ireland. While never designed to assist the organisation through a pandemic, our digital reach and engagement has allowed us to inform, educate, entertain, and inspire our rugby communities throughout COVID-19.

From assisting the HSE with health messaging, to inspiring parents to run drills with their kids in back gardens, the IRFU digital channels continued to provide high quality, creative and engaging content.

Working with the IRFU COVID Committee we delivered new platforms to assist our much-valued media partners and media colleagues. Our focus was to deliver a high-quality media product that was as close to the 'norm' as possible for the viewer at home. From press conference events for team

announcements to post match player reaction we delivered content that allowed supporters, sponsors, and the media to showcase and enjoy the best of rugby, at a time when the public really needed the distraction.

The communications team have worked with our colleagues in High Performance, the Domestic Game and in Marketing and Sponsorship to ensure timely messaging and support to all rugby related activities. Ready for Rugby and Return to Rugby programmes communicated with clubs throughout the pandemic, allowing clubs the clarity and support they needed, when they needed it most.

Rugby continued to enjoy unrivalled engagement levels while also looking to the future development of our digital strategy, which has proven to be invaluable to the organisation.

Medical

COVID-19

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced the cessation of all rugby activities and the country entered a prolonged period of lockdown. The IRFU Medical Department provided constant updates and advice to staff, provinces, and competition bodies during the lockdown restrictions. In August 2020 we successfully saw a return to play in both the Professional and Developmental games. Due to increased lockdown restrictions the domestic club game was halted again in October 2020, however schools continued to safely train until December 2020. The COVID-19 Committee, Medical department and Performance Nutrition developed strict protocols to mitigate the risk of COVID-19 transmission and protect player and staff wellbeing to allow training and matches to continue. The resumption of the Professional game saw the successful completion of the 2019/20 Six Nations, PRO14 and EPCR competitions, and the 2020/21 Autumn Nations Cup, the men's and women's Six Nations and PRO14. Preparations for the U20 Six Nations are currently ongoing, alongside the EPCR Champions Cup and Challenge Cup and the Rainbow Cup.

There have been over 19,500 COVID-19 PCR tests performed across all players and staff operating in the High-Performance Centres. There has been no evidence of COVID-19 transmission during match-play or within our High-Performance Centres across any of our professional teams and any community acquired positive cases were identified early and managed appropriately. We have partnered with UCD to test the sensitivity and specificity of antigen testing using lateral flow devices in comparison to PCR testing. Dr. Rod McLoughlin, IRFU Medical Director is a member of The Department of

Transport, Tourism and Sport, Expert Group on Return to Sport and the IRFU has been instrumental in the development of COVID-19 cross sport protocols (e.g. International Travel for High Performance Sporting Activities During The COVID-19 Pandemic). The IRFU has been acknowledged for the advice and support it has given to other sports in the development of their COVID-19 risk mitigation protocols.

RESEARCH

IRFU Research Committee

The IRFU Research and Education Committee, established in 2018, to provide oversight and governance to research activities, participated in 14 studies in 2020, six of which were able to continue in 2021. While many projects pivoted towards online surveys, we were deliberate in our participation and selection of projects, such as the '*Global Women's Rugby Survey*', with 78 players and coaches participating from Ireland.

In addition, we have established several projects internally to support our strategy and develop our staff. We have engaged with other stakeholders in Ireland around important projects related to medical imaging and COVID-19 antigen testing. We are one of only four sites globally that form part of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) Concussion Collaboration, looking into the prevention, detection, and management of concussion in rugby through an evaluation of multisystem involvement. The IRFU Performance Nutrition Department continues to work with the School of Public Health, Physiotherapy and Sports Science at UCD to facilitate projects for students undertaking the MSc Clinical Nutrition and Dietetics.

Medicine and Science Strategy Group

The IRFU Medical Department led the formation of the Medicine and Science Strategy Group in May 2020 with the stated aim, '*To find and deliver performance-driven solutions that enable our players and staff to thrive on and off the field*'. The Strategy Group includes the heads of each of the medicine and science disciplines (Medicine, Physiotherapy and Rehabilitation, Nutrition, Athletic Performance and Performance Analysis) as well as the IRFU Performance Director and Head of Operations. Five interdisciplinary subgroups of the Medicine and Science Strategy Group were established to provide guidance on the best way to build a performance services system to support performance over the incoming years.

Injury Surveillance

Across the High-Performance Unit and the **professional game**, we continue to provide insights around injury and illness trends through ongoing improvements in our injury surveillance system. The Injury Report for the 2019/20 season was released in December 2020, identifying key understandings in where to provide greater support and focus (Figure 1).

The **domestic game** suffered major disruption due to the pandemic. However, the IRFU Medical Department continued to gather injury information from the domestic game during the short periods where rugby could resume during the 2020/21 season. Despite the disruptions to the season due to lockdown restrictions, the numbers using the online system were in line with previous seasons indicating continued compliance from the provinces.

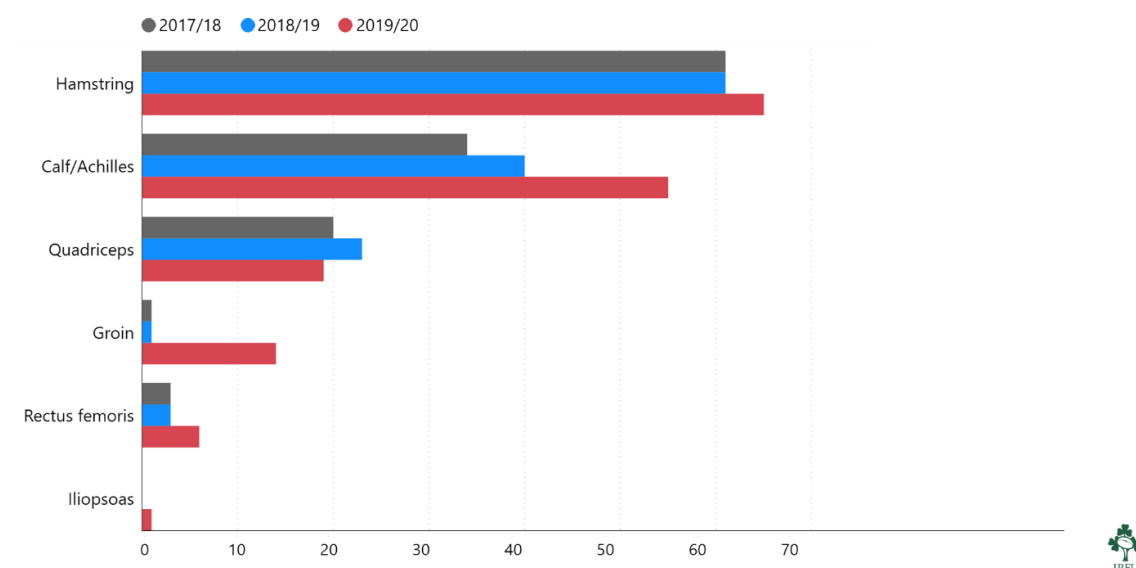


Figure 1: Overall injury trends for lower limb muscle injuries for the past three seasons

Irish Rugby Injury Surveillance (IRIS) project

The Irish Rugby Injury Surveillance (IRIS) Project was initiated in September 2016 through funding of from the IRFU. The IRIS Research Team in the University of Limerick have now accumulated approximately €1,000,000 of funding, with 20% of this provided by the IRFU. The third annual club report and second annual schools report were published by the IRIS Project in September 2020. <https://www.irishrugby.ie/playing-the-game/medical/research/>

In addition to the annual reports, the IRIS research team have published 15 papers in internationally renowned academic journals and have presented at 30 conferences, both nationally and internationally.

PLAYER WELFARE

ENGAGE – IRFU Rugby Readiness programme

The IRFU Medical Department has developed ENGAGE - a structured rugby readiness programme to assist players at all levels to prepare for and enjoy the game. The IRIS Project will assist in the rollout of the programme and assess its effectiveness. The ENGAGE programme is planned to be launched and made freely available at the start of the 2021/22 season.

The IRFU Medical Department have also contributed to a series of webinars entitled '*Ready for Rugby*' to advise coaches and players in the domestic game on how to safely return to rugby in April 2021. In addition, the Medical Department contributed to guidelines for the '*Return to Rugby*' initiative in 2020, on how players could stay active during the lockdown restrictions.

SAFE Rugby Programme

The SAFE Rugby – Standard Approach to Field Emergencies in Rugby – programme aims to provide rugby specific, pitch side emergency care training and skills to medical staff and non-medical individuals involved at all levels in Irish rugby across all four provinces. Towards the end of the 2019-20 season, SAFE Rugby passed a significant milestone with the 5,000th participant to our course.

Nutrition

Online nutrition programmes have been developed on Gainline for each year of the National Talent programme to form the fundamentals of nutrition education for these young developing players.

STAFF DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING

The IRFU Medical Department has continued to concentrate on staff development over the past year. Given the restrictions in face to face meetings due to COVID-19, a series of online webinars and discussion fora were created. The Medical Department organised presentations open to all performance staff from world-leading practitioners and researchers on the following topics: Calf and Achilles Injury (Dr Seth O'Neill, UK), Understanding Pain (Assoc Prof. Tasha Stanton, AUS), Shoes, Surfaces and Injury (Dr Athol Thomson, QAR). In addition to external experts we have established monthly practice sharing meetings for the national and provincial medical teams to share interesting and noteworthy lessons from practice and to discuss how these might influence practice on the ground. These have been highly successful and have fostered greater integration between all the national and provincial teams.

Anti-doping

1st September – 31st May 2021

Total number of tests 165

Team	In Competition	Out of Competition
Senior	2	30
Provincial (including Academy)	19	75
U20s	0	0
Age-grade	0	0
Women's (15)	2	0
Women's (7)	0	13
Men's (7)	0	26
ALL	0	0
TOTAL	23	144

Note:

- 1: Figures are for number of tests carried out between 1st September 2020 – 31st May 2021 (9-month testing period instead of 12), thus not comparable with previous seasons.
- 2: Reduced number of tests due to COVID.
 - Social distancing restrictions in anti-doping area for In-Competition testing restricted numbers tested
 - Reduced number of fixtures for women and U20 for In-Competition testing
 - No ALL league for In-competition testing
 - Limited out-of-competition testing possible at training venues to maintain social distancing and avoid cross contamination of training bubbles
 - No summer age-grade programme, no U20 camps or competition in this reporting period and limited schedule for 7s reduced out-of-competition tests
 - User Pays tests were reduced to align with reduced capacity to test
- 3: Players, staff and testers adhered to strict protocols to allow testing at international fixtures and at national and provincial training centres to keep testing and education programme going during this 9-month period.

Charitable Trust

36 seriously injured players are currently supported by the Trust across all four Provinces. Regular contact and continuous appraisal of their needs have been maintained throughout the period of the Pandemic and at the time of writing, the good news is that all have remained clear of COVID-19.

The Trust's involvement with the RCSI Research projects is now in its third year and despite inevitable disruption by the pandemic, shows great progress through the Spinal Research Group, the Public, Patient, Interaction Project, and the Leinster School's Project.

As with all Charities, there has been a drastic fall in the income streams for the Trust. Fortunately, through prudent stewardship, healthy reserves have enabled the Trust to continue with the appropriate support for the players. Long term forecasts predict a substantial deficit for 2021/22, presenting real challenges for the Fundraising team.

During the past 12 months much time has been given to improving the Charitable Trust website and in developing a campaign of awareness in the role of the Trust. A relaunch of the Friends of the Trust scheme gives the opportunity to individuals and Clubs to support the Trust by annual subscription. The fundraising team has drawn up a calendar of events drawn up for the time when normality may return. It is also pleasing to report the continued support of our main sponsors.

Committee

This has been an extraordinary year for the various Committees and Sub Committees that underpin the governance of the game across Ireland, the Provinces, and our Clubs. Physical meetings were replaced with virtual ones, across various online platforms as committees embraced new ways of working. Notwithstanding the challenges that this has presented we can take great pride for the way in which everyone from the top to the base of the game has taken on this change. Our thanks go to all those involved for their great resilience and patience.

Immediate Past President, Nicholas Comyn steps down from the IRFU Committee. Nicky joined the IRFU Committee in 2011 and served as Chairman of the AIL, Third Level and Junior Committee in 2015 and sat on the Rugby Committee several years. He has also played an important role in the IRFU Governance Review which culminates this year in an EGM to change the Laws of the IRFU. Best wishes to both Nicky and his wife Laura.

Declan Madden is approaching the end of his term as Chairman of the IRFU Management Committee. The IRFU Committee felt it was prudent to appoint a Chairman "Designate" to ensure overlap and continuity rather than a newly appointed Chairman facing a steep learning curve at the point of

succession. Niall Rynne was appointed Chairman “Designate” and has shadowed Declan Madden to get to grips with the breadth of the organisation and its activities.

Patrick Kennedy commenced his role as Hon. Treasurer following the retirement of Tom Grace in October 2020 after the delayed Annual Council meeting for 2019/20. His has been a baptism of fire given the financial crisis facing the game but hopefully there are some brighter signs on the horizon in terms of lifting of restrictions as the vaccination programme is rolled out.

Also stepping down are Mary Quinn, who joined the Committee in 2015, Tom Hennessy and John Sheerin who joined in 2016 and Brian Humphries who joined in 2020. Thank you for your commitment to Irish Rugby over the years and best wishes for the future.

Obituaries

W.R. Hunter	Former Ireland and Lions Player (1962-66, 10 Caps)
R. J. McCarten	Former Ireland Player (1961, 3 Caps)
G. Halpin	Former Irish Player (1990 – 1995, 11 Caps)
W.W. Bornemann	Former Ireland Player (1960, 4 Caps)
G. Quaid	Former IRFU Committee Member (2005-2010) Munster Branch President (2002-03)
R.J. Gregg	Former Ireland Player (1953 - 1954, 7 Caps)

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the following sponsors and
suppliers of Irish Rugby

