

Luck plays role in Comyn presidency

Too many players drop out at age of 19'

RUGBY

Seán McCarthy



LUCK has played a role in Nicky Comyn's journey to becoming the 131st president of the IRFU.

He first made a Union (IRFU) committee as a member of Sunday's Well RFC, a club he might not have joined had he not known the Egars, Tony and Billy who were from Mallow.

Luck or a twist of fate also played a part in his selection for that committee and sadly that twist of fate came after the loss of a club-mate and friend Billy Keating.

"I started in Mallow, that's where I am from originally," says Comyn. "The rest of my family are still pretty much based in or near Mallow. I went to the national school and played GAA, then I went to the Patrician Academy for a year before they carted me off to Clongowes.

"My father had been at Clongowes and his father before him so that's where I was sent to put a few manners on me," he says with a laugh.

"It toughens you up, what it did for me was that I arrived up there and knew nobody and that was hard but it was also character building because you either sink or swim in those situations and that stood to me.

"I went from there to UCD and played with the Freshers. Fergus Slattery (ex-Ireland flanker) actually played with the Freshers the second year I was there, he used to play centre.

"We had a lot of guys in that team who got close to the Irish level back then so I kinda faded away a little bit as I knew I wouldn't get to that level so I joined Palmerston — who are now DLSP — and were based in Clonskeagh back then."

That move was a breath of fresh air for the young student. Away from college life he saw a far more enjoyable side to rugby and saw the best of what club rugby could be both on and off the pitch — something that stuck with him.

"When I was there, I was known as the Little Professor because I was the only one on the team who was in university. They were all in different trades and professions which gave a real eclectic mix," says Comyn. "I spent four years with them, never won anything with them but enjoyed the great craic and the club spirit.

"I was working in my first job at the time, I lectured in constitutional history, I was going for my Masters at the time so I would have considered myself just two lectures ahead of the students.

"I then went into Mattheson Ormsby to be an apprentice and was working as an assistant solicitor to Shane Ross' father, John Ross. I met him (Shane) at a game and introduced myself and he said: 'I know already, daddy told me'." The home bug eventually bit and the aspiring solicitor was looking towards returning to Leeside both for his career and also for his rugby.

His brother Arthur was playing for Cork Con at the time so it seemed like a good idea to join him there.

"I played with Mallow as well while I



Nicky Comyn, IRFU, presents the Ulster Bank Bateman All-Ireland Cup to Cork Constitution captain Gerry Hurley.

Picture: INPHO/Cathal Noonan



IRFU president Nicholas Comyn with President of Ireland Michael D Higgins.

Picture: INPHO/Billy Stickland

was in Dublin. Because I was playing in Dublin I wasn't considered what they called seniorised. I was playing senior in a different province so I still was able to play with Mallow. The Munster rule didn't apply in Leinster.

"I joined Con and what I liked about it was that if Ireland had a big international on a Saturday and Con were playing on a Sunday players like Tommy Kiernan would still be there for the club on Sunday.

"I bounced in and out of the senior team so if I was in, Arthur was out and vice versa, we very rarely played together so I made the decision to leave Con and I joined Sunday's Well because the Egars, Billy and Tony came from Mallow so I'd have known them."

At the age of 31 he decided, with two young children at home, and his law career beginning to get very busy, that it was time to call a halt to his playing career. He did referee for five or six more years before becoming involved in Sunday's Well off the pitch.

Having worked his way through various committees at his own club, there looked to be bigger and brighter things ahead at Munster Branch level for Comyn until fate took its own turn.

"I got on the Union first day by one of those strange twists of fate that can happen sometimes.

"Each club has turns to get people on committees both at national and provincial levels. It was Sunday's Well turn to have the Munster president for

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our centenary year in 2006. The late Billy Keating said he would propose me for the Munster president's position and I would in turn support him if there was a position came up on the Union (IRFU).

"Billy had worked out that Sunday's Well would be given a Union place, I didn't know that, but sadly he passed away unexpectedly and never got to take that Union job so in a way it was a twist of fate or luck that I got on the Union committee to start with.

"It is a huge honour for me personally to be the first president of the IRFU in the Well's 113-year history. It also coincided with having our first lady president in the Well which was nice as well."

DURING his nine years at committee level, IRFU president Nicky Comyn has seen plenty of changes but as the 131st president, he would like to see progress on two key areas.

The first of those is participation. Like every other sport, rugby sees a huge drop off between the time players leave secondary school and the age of 21.

"One of the things we've always been looking at in my time with the Union has been participation.

"Participation is poor after the age of 18 or 19," says the Sunday's Well man.

"There's a drop off, especially after school. What you see is they are burned out when they come out.

"It's one of two things I would like progress on during my presidency," says the IRFU president.

"We actually have one committee looking at that to see is there a possibility of getting more participation.

"It's difficult. "The IRFU have put a lot of money into the domestic game and it has helped. If you play with a club you want decent facilities.

"Also if you are looking to draw more people in you are looking at having different types of competition.

"The IRFU are trying very hard with the sevens certainly on the professional side they are fairly successful to a certain degree and beginning to make a name for themselves but it's hard to bring it into universities and clubs who are not accustomed to the game."

And it's not just in men's rugby that the new president, who will be in situ until next July, wants to see progress. He is a huge fan of women's rugby and would love to see more structures put in place for coaching and developing the women's game.

"The second thing I like to see progress on during my presidency is women's rugby.

"The problem at the moment is that there is a national team who are lucky to have 150 players to pick from.

"There is a big output from underage level of girls playing but like everything else it tends to drop off at the wrong times and I just feel that if there can be a little more structure to it..."

"When we looked at the IRFU Rugby Committee at what attracted people to certain clubs, it was the coaching staff and the facilities.

"They have a good department in Dublin now in the IRFU who are coaching the coaches."

One of the highlights for Comyn this year will be a trip to the World Cup in Japan courtesy of World Rugby.

"I've never been to Japan and am looking forward to it and of course seeing Ireland win it!"