John Hayes at home in Cappamore, Co Limerick. Photo: Alan English

"I did what I did": John Hayes on paying a price for a rugby career in the front line

Until a few years ago, the first Ireland player to win 100 caps thought he'd got out of rugby largely unscathed, but he now has one-eighth movement in his neck and severe pain.

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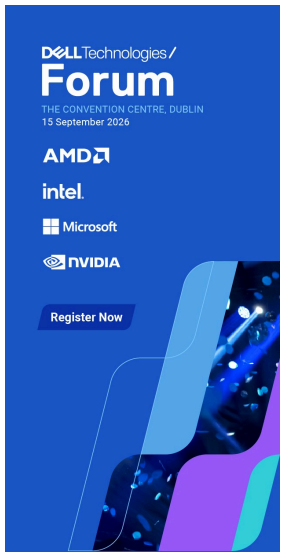

The interview with John Hayes has been running for just under 30 minutes and we've been talking about his early life in rugby. But then something happens which makes everything that's been said before seem almost inconsequential.

We're sitting in Hayes's spacious kitchen in Cappamore, Co Limerick. It's the second time I've been here – the first was almost 17 years ago, a couple of months after Hayes had been part of Ireland's 2009 Grand Slam-winning team.

He's not a man who talks much – his wedding speech was timed at one minute. For almost all of his career, he didn't talk to the media before or after games. "They stopped asking after a while," he says. But today we will speak for two hours.

We talk a little about the day he was first selected as his country's tighthead prop, 26 years ago now. Astonishingly, he would start every one of Ireland's next 54 Six Nations matches, over 11 seasons – a record that will almost certainly never be broken. Hayes played all 80 minutes in 39 of those Tests. In a run from 2001 to 2007, he was never off the pitch in 29 out of 30 Six Nations games.

He started 67 Heineken Cup games in a row for Munster, a sequence running through nine seasons that was only broken in 2009 by the one suspension of his career.

Even when they did replace him, he'd usually soldiered for more than 70 minutes. When they called him ashore in his final Six Nations game, the match clock at Croke Park was into the 80th minute as he jogged off the pitch against Scotland.

Mr Indestructible. The Bull.

He was 26 years old on the day of his first Test match, and it was only the second time he'd ever been to Lansdowne Road.

He would go on to become the first Ireland player to win 100 caps – and there aren't many prouder achievements in the Irish game than that. He hated the fuss around it, though, being made to run out at Twickenham ahead of the team: "Stuff like that was the worst. I knew it was coming, but I was thinking, 'Fucking get this over with.'

John Hayes runs out at Twickenham in 2010 to earn his 100th Ireland cap. Photo: Brendan Moran/Sportsfile

Forwards with nothing like his longevity were broken up by the physical demands. Even backs from the amateur era have been permanently marked by their time in rugby – replacement hips, new knees, bad backs, and more.

And yet, I say to John Hayes, as he faces me at the kitchen table, he looks like someone who got out of rugby pretty unscathed.

“I’m not too bad,” he says. “Neck is stiff now, but other than that, I’m not too bad.”

At this point it should dawn on me that he has barely moved in the chair since we started talking, but it doesn’t.

“There’s the physio”

His wife, Fiona Steed, arrives to make herself a cup of tea. She was a trailblazing rugby player herself, with 62 Ireland caps and three World Cups to her name. She’s a fine analyst of the game on TV and radio – a coach and administrator, too.

Back when John was playing, she says, there were more interviews done with sports people that went deep – longer pieces that told you something interesting about the subjects. These days, she laments, it’s mostly social media video clips and press conference interviews with prepared answers.

“Where were we?” I say to John, as Fiona prepares to go. “Oh yes, we were talking about your durability in terms of the injuries. It’s just your neck.”

He had mentioned some stiffness in his neck in an interview he did four years ago, but he played it down then, in the same way he does now.

“It’s about the only thing I have that gives me a bit of trouble. There’s the physio,” he says, nodding at Fiona, who has a master’s degree in physiotherapy.

And then it tumbles out, something known to very few people – because he doesn’t talk about it.

He’s in pain, a lot of pain – he has been for almost three years now. Over time, the stiffness worsened to almost complete seizure. He now has one-eighth movement in his neck.

To see left, right or behind him, he must rotate his entire upper body. They’ve been to see experts, some of the best people, but the degeneration is so bad that his neck has almost entirely fused. What this means is that the bones inside it can no longer move independently; they behave like one extremely stiff block.

A rhizotomy might be a possibility to deal with the bone growths now pinching a nerve that gives him headaches and pain. But it seems there is little else that can be done now.

He has had injections – but there can only be so many of those. When he's in pain, the neck muscles stiffen up as a protective mechanism. Soft-tissue physio brings some relief – he's fortunate to have experienced help on hand. Fiona also treats his lower back sometimes, but so far it is holding up quite well.

After his years of scrummaging, Hayes now has only one-eighth movement in his neck. Photo: Alan English

"I'm just used to it at this stage," he says, without a trace of self-pity. "I notice from time to time that other people aren't like this, but I am."

Other people aren't like what?

"They can sit there, talk to people and turn sideways and backwards. And I can't."

He has also had serious bouts of vertigo. There have been times when he hasn't been able to get out of bed, because the signals to his brain are scrambled by the inability to move his neck.

"For a good few years after retirement," he says, "if someone asked me how I'd come out of the game, I'd go, 'I'm fine, I got out OK.' But then, when I was pushing up 50 – I'm 52 now – I started to notice that the old neck was beginning to seize."

Unlike many other players of his era, he hasn't experienced issues around concussion or brain trauma. Neither has Fiona. But there is an obvious question. Has the relentless scrummaging – enormous, repeated pressure going straight through the cervical spine during all those 80-minute matches – eventually taken its toll?

They have no other explanation.

"For fuck's sake – another fella off the bench"

Forty per cent of spinal injuries that occur in rugby happen in the scrum. Hayes had retired by the time scrummaging laws were changed to reduce the impact between the two packs when they engage. Researchers at the University of Bath found that the new "Crouch, Bind, Set" technique resulted in a 25 per cent reduction in scrum forces.

Back when Hayes was playing, the word "Engage!" would produce an instant explosion of juddering force. But then it became more like a wrestling match at the front of the scrum, with a higher premium on technique.

"When we were playing," he says, "whoever could generate the most momentum from the hit would usually win the scrum. There was a bigger gap between the two front rows then – if you see them nowadays, they bring them right in. So they don't pound from as far out."

Ready for the hit: Hayes preparing to engage in the scrum with Gethin Jenkins of Wales during the 2005 Six Nations. Photo: Brendan Moran/Sportsfile

Rival teams would often send in a new prop to scrummage against him when there was still a lot of game time on the clock. "It might be at 50 minutes, and the next thing there would be a fresh prop packing down against you, and you're going, 'For fuck's sake – another fella off the bench.'"

At his best, he could be a destructive force around the rucks. When the massively heralded England loosehead prop Andrew Sheridan came to Thomond Park with Sale in 2006, he got no change out of Hayes at the scrum, but the Munster man's impact wasn't confined to the set-pieces.

"It was just incredible," Paul O'Connell said that day. "Whenever you're beside a ruck, Hayes pulls you out – he wants to be in there himself making the tackles."

Were there times when John Hayes was kept on the pitch for longer than he should have been – or put out there in the first place – because others weren't trusted to do his job? It's a legitimate question and the answer can only be 'yes'.

When you're in the thick of it, the long-term consequences of putting your body on the line can feel abstract and distant. Irish player welfare today is regarded as safer and stricter than the norm in some countries, like France, but medical teams are always going to be better at answering the question, 'Can he play next week?' than 'What might this mean for him when he's 50?'

Looking through the record books, it's staggering how often experienced props were left on the bench for the entire game when Hayes was on the pitch, particularly in the earlier years of his career.

When they did come on, it was usually the loosehead prop who was withdrawn. It was only in the final months of his time with Munster that the laws allowed for a second prop on the bench, bringing match squads from 22 to 23.

"It went with the territory"

Ask most rugby players, and they'll tell you they have played with persistent niggles, the pain managed with physio, or relieved by injections.

"Rugby normalises pain and injuries," said the battered former England captain Dylan Hartley. "It's great for the soul but terrible for the body."

But The Bull Hayes has no quarrel with what was asked of him.

"I did what I did – it went with the territory, that's just the way it was. You're pushing things to the edge and you can't not do it," he says.

"It's different now – there isn't anyone doing the same amount of minutes in game times. But they're still going hard at it."

Fiona leaves us to it. The story of her husband's career and what happened after it is John's to tell. Her version might be different.

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"It's like being trapped between two cars in a slow-motion crash. Everything is compressing, your neck, your spine, your lungs. You're trying to breathe when the space to expand simply isn't there … Your vision narrows, your hearing dulls, and you're reduced to a series of instincts: stay square, stay up, don't yield." – **Brian Moore, England hooker (1987-1995, 64 caps)**

There is another thing he has kept to himself.

December 26, 2011. Munster v Connacht at Thomond Park, the very last time he put on a rugby jersey of any colour. His contract was up and he was supposed to have retired a few months before, but Munster had injured props and they asked him to stay beyond his 38th birthday.

He knew this was the end, though. That was a great thing about it – he had time to enjoy the week: "It was the absolute best feeling ever, knowing five days out that I'd be starting and that it would be my last game."

But early on the morning of the match, a strange feeling came over him.

"It was the only time in my whole career that I woke up and thought, *'Fuck – what if I got seriously injured today?'*

"For some weird reason something came into my head. What if a scrum collapsed and I broke my neck? I remember being in the bed and thinking, 'How could that happen in my last game?'

"Over the years, people would have said to me, 'How do you do that scrummaging? Are you not worried about an injury?' But if you think that could ever happen to you, you'd never fucking do it, you wouldn't be able to play. And I never did think about that, not for one minute.

"But for those few seconds, it was in my head, and then I thought, 'Get out of this fucking scenario', and I jumped up, out of the bed. I never thought of it again for the rest of the day. Played the match, everything was perfect, and that was it. Done."

"Your neck isn't sore – it's under siege"

The England tighthead prop Phil Vickery had retired the previous year, aged 34, after damaging his neck in a club game. During his career, he had come back from four major back and neck operations. Vickery once said of scrummaging: "Your neck isn't sore – it's under siege."

Thirteen months ago, Vickery revealed that scans have shown signs consistent with probable chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) – a degenerative brain condition linked to repeated head impacts.

Vickery is one of around 1,100 players – almost 800 from rugby union and the rest from rugby league – who have taken group litigation in the UK High Court. They claim the governing bodies were negligent in not protecting them from the long-term effects of repeated head impacts and concussions. Medical assessments suggested two-thirds have shown symptoms of CTE.

"I'm not angry, I'm not bitter … but I will need help," Vickery said.

The former international David Corkery is part of the UK action, after halting an Irish concussion lawsuit.

Four Irish players issued proceedings here, but only one case remains. Tony Buckley, the former Munster and Ireland prop who replaced Hayes in the last minute of his final Six Nations game, is **suing Munster Rugby and the IRFU**, claiming long-term brain injury from repeated concussions.

Tony Buckley is suing Munster Rugby and the IRFU. Photo: AP/Alamy

"With the game the way it is now, pain is a constant," Buckley said in a 2018 interview. "You can't take that many hits and not be in pain. I'm still plagued. My body is destroyed."

Another international prop, Justin Fitzpatrick, was one of the initial four Irish players who took the legal action, but a notice of discontinuance was filed in his case last year. Fitzpatrick won the first of his seven caps in 2012, but retired on medical grounds three years later, aged 31, after repeated concussions.

"I'm told it was a great match"

Dr Barry O'Driscoll, capped four times by Ireland and a former medical adviser to World Rugby, resigned in 2012 over the governing body's concussion protocols.

"It has got worse since I resigned," he told *The Irish Times* in 2021. "We have become more relaxed about sending players with brain injuries back to the field, when the game has become more threatening, and the players are bigger, heavier and the knocks are huge.

"We are damaging players' brains again and again. And unfortunately, the things that will happen to them won't happen for five years, some won't happen for 20 years … We are abusing these young men."

Like many players of his era – men who put their desire to play the next game before any concerns about concussion – Hayes thinks the decision to play or not needs to be taken out of players' hands. But even though concussed players are taken off far more often now, that is easier said than done, because the effects can be hidden.

He came through at a time when the joke among concussed players was often "I'm told it was a great match – but I can't remember it."

He was nearly four years retired when rugby's head injury assessment (HIA) protocols finally became part of the game. Before that, players were almost never removed from the field for head injury, unless they were visibly unconscious.

When Hayes was knocked out after 37 minutes of a Heineken Cup game for Munster against Wasps in 2007, he was "carted off concussed".

Into the fray, for his Heineken Cup debut, came Tony Buckley. Hayes was back in the team the following week.

Long list of post-career surgeries

In all his time playing rugby, John Hayes never once had an operation. If he picked up a knock, he was back on the field within a couple of weeks. He put that barely conceivable robustness down to starting late, and being physically mature by the time he began taking the hits.

Before telling him that he appeared to have come out of the game in very good health, I had mentioned my conversations with the 1978 Munster team that beat the All Blacks. I'd spoken to them around 25 years – and then 40 years – after that famous day.

They played the game when it was a very different sport, far less physical than it is today.

"I wake up some mornings and I feel like I could play again. Until I try to get out of bed," said Donal Spring in 2018. They were men in their sixties then – and the list of post-career surgeries was long.

Larry Moloney, full-back: Two hip replacements, osteoporosis in both knees.

Jimmy Bowen, wing: Seven knee operations.

Christy Cantillon, flanker: Two knee replacements.

Donal Spring, No 8: Two back operations.

Gerry McLoughlin, prop: Knee replacement.

Seamus Dennison, centre: Two hip replacements.

Others spoke of sore backs, stiff shoulders, lingering wrist pain, and more. That was eight years ago, and the list is surely longer now. The lock forward Moss Keane had died of cancer in 2010, but even before he retired his body was beginning to give in. There were problems with his lower back, his shoulders, his knee – and he was down to 70 per cent rotation in his neck.

Lung disease claimed the flanker Colm Tucker's life, a year after Keane's death. "If he was still here, I imagine he'd be having bits of him replaced," his widow Geraldine told me. "His right knee was giving him a lot of trouble. He always had a bad back."

"That could be ahead of us too"

"I don't know where the game is going, because it seems to be complete physicality now," reflected Bowen. "I'm fairly broken up from rugby – and I think some of these guys today are going to be in a mess."

"Oh my God, I worry," said Geraldine Tucker of impacts she sees in the modern game.

"That could be ahead of us too," Hayes says matter-of-factly, meaning the players he came up with, almost all retired now. "By the time the rest of us get to our late 60s, we'll probably be getting hips and other stuff done as well. It happens to people in most sports – hurlers, footballers. That's the way it goes, there's going to be something. It's wear and tear."

He can still work the 90-acre farm where he has a herd of sucklers ("You don't milk 'em – some people call it a beef farm"). His father switched from dairy farming when he was eight or nine and he has kept it going.

Hayes is a beef farmer in Cappamore, Co Limerick.

Driving the tractor became a problem, because he couldn't turn backwards, "but now I've good mirrors fitted and stuff like that".

Not long ago, he read a report about farming having an ageing population, and quoting the percentage now over 50. “I thought, ‘Fuck, that’s me! How did that happen?’ I would have seen myself as a young farmer.”

When I ask him about the long-term prognosis for his neck, there’s a flash of the quick wit he was known for in the dressing room.

“I don’t know, really – but don’t think I’m ever going to turn into an owl. From what I understand, there’s no major thing [procedure] I could get that will sort it.”

He will, he says, “manage away with it” and get on with life.

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“The game spits you out at a moment when most people are marching along a steady path towards financial security. You wake up one morning and a large chunk of your social circle – the changing room – has disappeared. Your wages are sliced in half (if you’re lucky) and you’ll probably be forced into an alien environment, doing a job you barely understand, in civvies, after 14 years in the smoothest routine imaginable that was all geared towards living a boyhood dream. What follows is shrouded by fear of the unknown.” – **Jamie Heaslip, Ireland No 8 (2006-2017, 95 caps)**

It feels difficult to segue from a serious neck injury, especially when it has landed in the conversation so unexpectedly, but it helps when you’re in the company of one of Irish rugby’s most likeable and admirable men.

With the likely exception of the much-reduced wages, there is little in what Jamie Heaslip wrote eight years ago that rings true in the case of John Hayes.

The game didn’t spit him out – he couldn’t be happier about how he left it. Sure, he’d wanted to make the 2011 World Cup squad, but he’d lost his place in the team and he’d have been coming off the bench, at best. And physically, it felt harder then.

The month before his final game, he became the first man to make 100 appearances in the European Cup – an accolade pointed out to him by Munster’s forwards coach at the time, the late Anthony Foley. (“May he rest in peace,” says Foley’s old team-mate.)

He had plenty of friends in the dressing-room – he was closest to Foley and Alan Quinlan – but they weren’t really his social circle. Famously, he went back to Cappamore when the rest of the 2009 Grand Slam winners headed for a victory parade in Dublin.

All these years later, he remembers driving back to see his newly born daughter, Róisín, for only the second time. “It felt so great. The roads were quiet, so I was tipping away nice and handy. I saw the team celebrating on the television and I was thinking, ‘Why the fuck would I want to be up there?’ And they wouldn’t even have known whether I was there or not.”

Not the norm

He doesn’t do WhatsApp groups. How often does he see the guys he played with?

“Not very often, no.”

When was the last time he saw, for example, Brian O’Driscoll?

“It would have been Axel’s funeral [in 2016]. I’d say so, yeah.”

Paul O’Connell?

“I haven’t met him for a while now. I might bump into him inside in Limerick.”

He's not much of a man for team reunions, either. "And they'll all tell you that, too," he says. "I wouldn't be the norm, I suppose, to the rest of them."

In 2020, there was a joke going around among his former teammates. "Quinny, or someone like that, was saying, 'Someone would want to tell Hayes there's a pandemic on – because his life is not going to change in any way.' That kind of slagging."

He laughs at that, and says his response back then was: "I've been proved right all along, by self-isolating."

A career no one saw coming

He doesn't want it to come across like he doesn't enjoy meeting people. "I'm trying to make it sound right – and not bad. It's not for any bad reasons, or anything like that. I don't go to pubs, but I love meeting people – fellas I know, friends of mine. I just don't want to be inside somewhere with 20 other people, or 10.

"There isn't anything awkward. If I haven't met a fella for a year or two, I love talking to him. But I don't feel a need to be ringing someone every fucking six months and saying, 'How are you?'"

As for being forced into an alien environment and fear of the unknown – well, he's back working on the farmland he grew up on.

Standing tall: Hayes at home. Photo: Alan English

I bring up the old line, attributed to Jackie Robinson, about athletes dying twice – physical death and the moment their sporting careers end. We talk about the runner David Gillick, who wrote a book last year recounting how he felt no longer had a purpose when athletics was over for him, because his entire identity had been tied to the sport. He'd been living a boyhood dream, as Heaslip put it. A number of retired Irish rugby players have also spoken openly about feeling a loss of identity.

That wasn't Hayes's experience. "I didn't grow up wanting to do it, like David Gillick or soccer players who go to England, or the guys making their way in rugby today. That's all they want to do. How much wanting is that?

“Somebody like that, when they retire, they might ask themselves, ‘What am I now?’ But I was something else before I ever played rugby for a living. I finished school in 1991 and professionalism didn’t come in until 1995, so it just wasn’t an option. I had a career that no one saw coming, not just me.”

Picked for Ireland

His first Ireland cap in February 2000, against Scotland, is his favourite rugby memory. When he called his parents to tell them about his selection, the conversation with his father, Mike, supposedly went something like this.

“I’m picked to start on Saturday.”

“Are you?”

“I am.”

“That’s grand, so.”

“Grand.”

“Right, so.”

“OK. Bye bye”

“Bye.”

‘Supposedly’ because he can’t recall exactly what was said – but the phonecall was soon being relayed by his fellow prop Peter Clohessy, his roommate that week, to the rest of the squad.

“I can remember the lads doing impressions of me more than the actual call,” he says. “It wasn’t a call that would have gone on for long, so they’d have been fairly close alright.”

No tears, no regrets

Twelve years later, his time was over, after the game with Connacht on St Stephen’s Day, his 217th appearance for Munster. The team trained that week in Bruff, where he learned to played the game, and RTÉ sent a camera crew.

“Probably the best thing you could say about Hayesie is that when he retires, he’ll always be a friend to the fellas he played with, even though he won’t answer his phone,” said Anthony Foley.

A giant banner at Thomond Park that night read ‘GO ON BULL TIS YOUR FIELD’. They called him off after an hour, as he was standing on the far side of the pitch from the dugout, so that he would have to walk across the field. Except, of course, he didn’t want to milk it.

“Someone called out, ‘You’re off’ – and it was only then that I really thought, ‘This is the last time I’m ever going to do this.’ So I jogged over and it was just extra special. There was no sadness, no tears, it was just … I knew this was the best time to go. There wasn’t one bit of regret.”

After his last game of rugby, in December 2011, with wife Fiona and their daughters Roisin, left, and Sally. Photo: Diarmuid Greene/Sportsfile

It was also a day when the Munster faithful showed him they knew how much he had given – or they had a fair idea, at least.

In Gay Talese's long piece *The Silent Season of a Hero*, there is a vignette from 1954 about the retired and increasingly withdrawn Joe DiMaggio. He was 39, two years out of baseball and newly married to Marilyn Monroe. She was 27 and at the height of her fame.

During their honeymoon, she visited thousands of US troops in Korea and on her return she told DiMaggio: "It was so wonderful, Joe. You never heard such cheering."

"Yes I have," he said.

Monroe's line came to mind when viewing, on YouTube, a brief clip from a camera phone in the stand showing the moment Hayes walked towards the tunnel at Thomond Park at the end of that last game, alongside Fiona and their two girls. More than TV cameras ever could, it captures what the people who were there that night thought of him.

Such cheering.

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These days he's one of the coaches for the Bruff Under-14s and reliable sources say he's the least vocal of the four on the sideline. Young Bill Hayes plays in different positions: "He's not pigeonholed into any slot yet. I don't know if he wants to play seriously or not."

Daughters Sally and Róisín have been playing since they were little – and Sally is now a second-row with the adult women's team (head coach: Fiona Steed).

He goes to the very occasional professional game, once or twice a year – he prefers to watch his rugby at home. The last thing he'd do is put on a coat or a hat with a Munster or Ireland badge on it – anywhere, but particularly at a rugby ground.

"I'd hate people looking at me thinking, 'He's still wearing the gear, he still thinks he's part of it.' So if I go, I go with my own hat on, my own coat on, and that's it."

Scrummaging still engages him like no other facet of the game and he obviously has a much better idea of what's going on in the front row than most.

"I was watching a match last weekend and the first 10 scrums, every one of them was a reset," he says. He doesn't like it, but he understands it. "If you're not comfortable, then boom, just drop it. You're in there gambling all the time, deciding what's the best outcome and the worst outcome. Giving away a penalty and a shot at goal for three points is better than a pushover try."

Counting the minutes

He's always struck by how quickly replacement front-rows tend to be introduced these days. "I see them bringing on two new props, sometimes very early in the second half, and I'm thinking, 'Jesus, they're really counting the minutes now.'"

One game he did see live, along with the Under-14s, was the Springboks' demolition of Ireland's scrum in November. As he was leaving the ground, wearing glasses and a hat, somebody called out, "They could have done with you today, John!" He smiled when he heard that: "I'm not a complete fucking stone."

"South Africa had dominance," he says, "and the Springbok mentality then is, 'Go at it'. They're not going to take their foot off your throat. People would have said, 'Why are they still scrummaging?' But it wasn't like they were 50 points up. They got what they wanted – a penalty try and a yellow card."

Ireland will benefit from that experience, he thinks. "In some ways losing can be as good as winning, because it drives you for the next time. I don't believe they're going to dominate the Boks, but they can match them. I think they'll come back at them."

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An hour and three-quarters into the interview, I start worrying that it might be uncomfortable for him, barely moving in the chair for so long.

Hayes has no complaints about his career in rugby. Photo: Alan English

"Are you in pain now?" I ask.

"No," he says, "because I'm not turning."

If he is now paying a price for what he asked of his body, he is doing so uncomplainingly. "How many other fellas is there the same as me?" he asks.

"You couldn't even describe how good it was," he says of that time in his life.

Next Saturday: In part two of a three-part series on Ireland tighthead props, Alan English interviews Mike Ross, who followed John Hayes into the Ireland team.

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