

Words Alan Pearey // Main Picture Mick Massey

MIXED BLESSING

Mixed ability rugby shows the sport at its purest and it's going worldwide

ALAN CRAUGHWELL was in a physio's room in Cork when he picked up the May 2012 edition of *Rugby World*. As he read the story of the Bumble Bees, at the time England's only mixed ability rugby team, his eyes widened and his head whirled.

"It was a lightbulb moment," says Craughwell, who works in the field of intellectual disabilities. "I immediately thought of two guys I was supporting at the time: Danny Lynch and James Healy.

"Danny is as tall as Paul O'Connell and James is a shortarse like Peter Stringer. The two of them are mad Munster fans and I just thought, 'These guys need to play rugby'. At the time the only rugby offering for someone with disability in Ireland was adapted tag. So I asked them, 'What do you think of this?' One of them replied, 'As long as I'm not pulling f-ing strings off shorts, I want to play.'"

Craughwell had no rugby links – he was a swimmer, hailing from Galway – but one of his mates, Liam Maher, was involved at the Sunday's Well club in Cork. Maher said he'd take it to the ➔





Unconfined joy

Alberto Aguirre Arin, from the Basque team Gaztedi Rugby Taldea, makes a break against Castleford RUFC

→ committee and, to their eternal credit, the club decided to run with it. Today the IRFU is hugely supportive but that wasn't the case when the Sunday's Well Rebels, Ireland's first mixed ability rugby team, started training in January 2014.

"The main obstacle is that it was quite radical: the concept of putting people who might be classed as vulnerable into contact sport. And it was slap-bang in the middle of all the reports about concussion. Then you add in people with disabilities who may have a diminished capacity to make decisions; the legality around that is a minefield.

"The club has been fantastic. They took a punt on this big time. They backed it, even when the pressure was on. And the pressure did come on from the union."

The resistance revolved around a lack of understanding, of preconceptions that are hard to shift. Even now there are many who can't accept that people with disabilities can play full-contact rugby (scrums are passive). But seeing is believing. From a distance, mixed ability rugby might look like a poor-quality junior game but the closer you get, the better it looks. That's when you get to appreciate the sheer thrill and

excitement of the sport, played in its purest form without a 'winning' imperative to weigh it down.

Disabilities come in many forms. Down's syndrome might spring to mind but maybe not someone who was starved of oxygen at birth, or who acquired a brain injury. Healy, for example, the Rebels hooker, fell out of a window when he was three years old.



Some players suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. Many are on the autism spectrum, or have Asperger's, which makes it difficult for them to engage with society. The conditions vary but not the enthusiasm for rugby or the healing hands of the sport.

"Take Lorcan Kelleher, one of the original guys," says Craughwell. "Lorcan

has a diagnosis of autism. When someone passed to him, the ball would bounce off him. I remember saying to his dad, 'Is he enjoying it?' Lorcan wouldn't talk too much, he struggled even saying hello to anybody.

"But Lorcan then developed in his own right as a player, at understanding the game, he knows where to be, where to go. In fact, he reprimanded me one time on the pitch. Very strongly, by the way! I came into a ruck from the side and gave away a penalty. "He went from looking at the ground to holding his head high. And being able to say hello and talk to people. His dad would tell us that he'd have his bag packed a couple of days in advance before training. That's how much he likes it."

Craughwell has countless examples. Like Patrick O'Flynn, who spent all his life watching his brothers play rugby for a rival club, Highfield, and wishing he was out there. The Rebels enabled him to fulfil his dream and two seasons ago he had the pleasure of playing against his brother, Peter, and swapping jerseys. Their mum, Gemma, swelled with pride.

"There's one guy, Richard Philpott, who likes to refer to himself as 'The



A place for everyone
Sunday's Well Rebels got the ball rolling in Ireland

Tank’,” continues Craughwell. “He comes to training with actual war paint on. He could look like Mel Gibson out of *Braveheart*. He would not have had such a circle of friends if it wasn’t for rugby. He’s been able to cope a lot better with social situations. And disappointment too, because he missed the last (Mixed Ability) World Cup with a shoulder injury and now this year’s is postponed because of Covid-19. He handed me a bottle of wine one Christmas. He said, ‘This is for you, I had nothing before rugby, you changed my life.’ Great guy, never misses a training session. Never.”

For a lot of the guys, new-found confidence has transferred from the

Well played

A player’s award for Pumpas of Argentina at IMART 2017



“We want it to be a social change, not just a change in one sport”

pitch to wider life, bringing job opportunities. Maher, Craughwell’s unstinting ally at the Rebels, owns a hostel and guest house and has hired staff with disabilities for his business. Others have shown the same faith.

And the word has spread. One has become six, with Malone Tornados, Banbridge, De La Salle Palmerston Hawks, West Cork Jesters and Ballincollig Trailblazers, Ireland’s first women’s mixed ability team, being founded in the last few years. “It’s snowballing,” says Craughwell.

SOCIAL EQUALITY

The upsurge of mixed ability rugby in Ireland draws approving nods over in West Yorkshire. Mark ‘Gooders’ Goodwin and Martino Corazza are the guardians of the sport, educators and pioneers who wanted to put what was an ad hoc practice on a formal footing.

Corazza was a support teacher in mainstream schools for people with disabilities. In 2008-09 he was doing something similar to mixed ability rugby

in Turin and wanted to share his experiences. Gwilym Lewis, manager of the long-standing Llanelli Warriors side, put him in touch with Gooders, who *RW* met in 2012 when we spent the day with his beloved Bumble Bees Barbarians.

Corazza says: “My idea in 2012 was to get some European funding, spend a few months in England, share practice, share learning, then go back to Italy. It didn’t quite work like that. That was eight years ago and I’m still here.”

The two men wanted to create a network of clubs using rugby for social inclusion. So in 2014 they formed IMAS (International Mixed Ability Sports), a not-for-profit, community interest company. Gooders says: “We were running a class basically of rugby players who had intellectual impairment or autism, and we realised that the story was exciting. Of what they’d done, how the team had been created.

“And so we got the guys to go out and tell their stories. And we still do actually. We have a network of people doing various mixed ability sports now who

have cognitive or physical disabilities or both, and they are experts by experience.

“And so they share their stories with grass-roots community rugby clubs. They say, ‘This is my experience of my club where I’m a member now.’ And they talk about the benefits that mixed ability rugby brings to a club.”

This is not just Bumble Bees players, far from it. The model is spreading worldwide. In fact, the two men were recently in Canada teaching support staff how to utilise the experience of disabled players in Ontario. They caught one of the last flights home before the pandemic brought normal life to a halt.

“Many clubs see mixed ability as a way to re-engage with the local community,” adds Corazza. “It doesn’t matter how good you are, it doesn’t matter if you win on a Saturday, it’s about a social element, engaging with friends and family, supporters in the clubhouse, buying beers, memberships. Those are values that a club understands.

“We were lucky because England Rugby helped us in rolling out this idea. Being the most powerful union in terms of resources meant other unions started to realise there was a value in this model. And now we have teams, and ➔



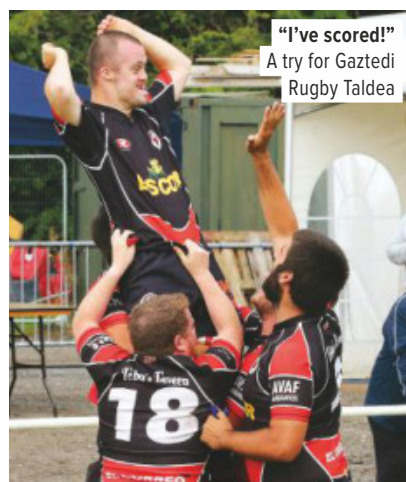
Busy Bees Lee Hainsworth carries hard for Bumble Bees Barbarians at IMART 2015 and (right) Ahsan Sakander takes on Sunday’s Well Rebels during the final

→ teams of trainers, in Spain, Italy, Belgium, Argentina. They establish a team in a club and then go out to promote the model to other clubs. And that's been undertaken pretty much all across Europe."

Eight years on from our feature, there are more than 60 mixed ability rugby teams. England (19), Argentina (11) and Spain (nine) lead the way – see our graphic, opposite page – but the tentacles spread far and wide; there's now a team or the beginnings of one in New Zealand, Ecuador, Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay, Netherlands, Portugal, Singapore and Hong Kong.

Rugby is the main driving force but in Bradford, home of IMAS, there are 12 different sports running weekly sessions (Covid-19 excepted), with the likes of rowing, swimming and cricket on board.

And women's mixed ability rugby is also gathering steam, Yeovil being a noteworthy example. In Spain, boys and



"I've scored!"
A try for Gaztedi
Rugby Taldea

girls can train together up to 16 years of age and the more relaxed regulations have helped the country to launch four women's mixed ability sides.

All this has been achieved by a volunteer-based programme, with most funding that is available amounting only to expenses. IMAS has just finished a 'Try for change' programme that was part of a Sport Relief bid they put in. So that money has dried up now.

"We have a philosophy that we learnt from an England Rugby Development Officer many years ago," Gooders says. "And that was, when we kept getting knocked back, to paddle our own canoe. We've basically paddled our own canoe."

"We want it to be a social change, not just a change in one sport. But as it happens, rugby is leading that social change. People of all abilities coming together becoming the new norm. The premise is let's stop splitting people up, let's start getting people together."

A jewel in their crown is IMART (International Mixed Ability Rugby Tournament), a World Cup for the sport that has been held in the UK (Bradford, 2015) and Spain (Vitoria-Gasteiz, 2017) and which showcases mixed ability in all its glory.

This year's event in Cork has been carried over to 2021 but when it happens it will be a wonder. Over 1,000 players, representing 28 teams from 14 countries, will be on view. Up for grabs is not only the Winners' Cup but the Spirit of Mixed Ability Trophy that rewards core values.

Once reluctant, the IRFU are behind it all the way, providing infrastructure and marketing. It will take place across three rugby clubs, Sunday's Well, Dolphin and Munster, enclosed within a spacious facility at Irish Independent Park. Half the budget is covered by the European Union and as well as the tournament, there will be a conference featuring talks like 'From pitch to employment'



Changing lives
Alan Craughwell (left)

and 'The risk paradox'. Peter O'Mahony and Ian McKinley are ambassadors.

COMMUNITY VISION

Which brings us back to Craughwell. The sport's third Mixed Ability World Cup will be a memorable staging post for the Sunday's Well Rebels team that he co-founded and which has quadrupled in size in its six-year existence. They now have 30 guys training regularly on a Friday night, and a player pool of



On top of the world
Rebels captain Danny Lynch
after winning IMART 2015 in Bradford



Giving his all
Matias Viacava kicks
whilst guesting for Turin
club Chivasso Rugby Onlus

game is to the detriment of people being involved. And I think there will be a shift back to the community game; including as many people in the sport as possible.

"The people without disabilities are there to play rugby, they're not carers. And that's important. It doesn't work if you come there to be a volunteer. Because if you're there as a volunteer you're there to get gratification for yourself, to get a feel-good factor out of it. We're a bunch of lads who play rugby together. We look out for each other.

"We've travelled a good bit of Europe together. They've been to big nightclubs, like The Three Sisters in Edinburgh on a Pro12 final weekend. They probably would never be in a nightclub at home. It's because we're a team."

Some of those without disability are club stalwarts with successful rugby careers behind them. Men like Mike Moynihan, who helped his team-mate Aaron to cope after his dad passed away. And Padraic Sisk, who had never won anything until that final in Bradford and who cried on the pitch.

nearly 50. "And the split is nearly 50:50, people with or without disabilities," he says. "That's not on purpose, we didn't set out to do that. I put it down to the support of the club and good coaching. Just not messing with the game. Just play the game."

Sunday's Well do it very effectively. So effectively, in fact, that they have reached the two IMART finals to date, winning the first in 2015 before losing to Pumpas of Argentina in 2017. Coach Maeve D'Arcy has them well drilled.

"We play to our strengths. We're not the fastest or most skilful but we know how to put a ball up the jumper and march up the field!" Craughwell says. "Winning in 2015 was unbelievable. We partied on that for a full year."

"I think there will be a shift back to the community game"


He recalls an event after their triumph, the clubhouse packed for a Q&A with Alan Quinlan and Luke Fitzgerald, who were showing off the Six Nations trophy. Danny Lynch stands up. "Hey Quinny, have you ever won a World Cup?" says the big second-row.

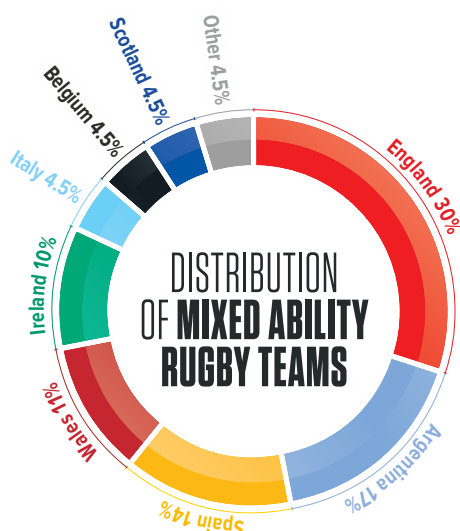
"No," says Quinlan.

"Well, I have!" Cue a roar from the assembled throng.

Craughwell says there are powerful messages to be had. "Only 1% of players are professional, the other 99% never were and never will be at that level, nor do we want to be. What rugby is learning is that the reliance on the professional

"The lads are inspired by the people around them. Like the guy who's played All-Ireland League for ten years and has come back. Next thing he's playing with people who are throwing the ball forwards, backwards and sideways and are maybe running off the pitch. He's imparting his rugby knowledge to somebody he'd never have any reason to meet in his daily life. The magic is that. The magic is that you have a mishmash of people who are only there for one thing. Well, two. Rugby and pints. It's infectious. Really infectious."

For more about mixed ability rugby or IMART, visit mixedabilitysports.org 



Boys on tour Sunday's Well Rebels in Vitoria-Gasteiz, 2017. The club hosts the third World Cup next year