

APPOINTMENTS

Stay fit for work at close of play

Sports professionals need to play a long game when it comes to future options, writes Gabrielle Monaghan

At the age of 17, Daragh Sheridan was signed up by Aston Villa and was hailed as football's next boy wonder. Two years later, he was back home, playing for Galway United and fielding questions in nightclubs about why he was deselected. By the age of 24, a knee injury put an end to Sheridan's football career altogether, leaving him to contemplate how he would earn a living for the next 40 years.

"I didn't go out for six weeks when I came home in case someone asked me about it, and when I did finally go out, a couple of guys had a dig at me," said Sheridan, now head of performance skills at the Irish Institute of Sport. "That failure had a massive impact on me and how the community saw me in Galway."

"I was fortunate enough to be on the path to becoming a sport scientist. I could never have planned for my football career being over on the spot."

Nowhere does the adage about how there are no longer any jobs for life ring truer than in professional sport. The loss of status, routine and, for some, stratospheric salary can take its toll when a career is cut short by injury, deselection or mere age. It is especially challenging for sportspeople entering the job market as it stands at present, with the worst economic

conditions since the great depression of the 1930s.

Some are able to exploit their status and personality to good effect, with Eamonn Coghlan, the former Olympic runner, now finding his feet in the Seanad chamber after being selected as a senator by Enda Kenny, the taoiseach, last month.

The elite are the exceptions. Not every former rugby player, for instance, can morph into Anthony O'Reilly, who won 29 caps for Ireland before becoming chairman of Heinz and then buying into and running Independent News & Media.

O'Reilly was "the perfect example" to young sportspeople craving a successful career after sport, the French Academy of Sport said when bestowing him an award in 2008. But, as O'Reilly acknowledged, there was more time for academics and career preparation in the era when he was playing.

Eking out a new career in your thirties — one that generates enough income for a mortgage and children — is particularly daunting if you have not prepared for it, as the first batch of Irish professional rugby players now retiring are discovering. Kieran Campbell, the former Ulster scrum-half, is studying to be a school teacher. The Munster winger and Heineken Cup winner John Kelly plans to qualify as an accountant with KPMG in Cork.

Just 6% of retired rugby players from the professional era find the retirement experience easy, a 2008 survey for the Irish Rugby Union Players Association (IRUPA) found in 2008.

Four in 10 players had their careers cut short by injury and 72% remained in regular pain or discomfort due to the injuries sustained during their playing career.

Under the direction of Hamish Adams, the IRUPA, which counts businessman Denis O'Brien as an executive director, has more than 100 men in a player services programme aimed at cushioning the transition from professional sport.

Adams, a New Zealander who came to Ireland to play and coach in the All-Ireland League before doing a three-year stint as manager of the Munster Academy, is now responsible for providing players with guidance on all aspects of their career.

"My role is getting players to start thinking earlier about their future careers," Adams said. "Anecdotally, a lot of people traditionally ended up in financial services or banking. There are fewer opportunities in the workplace now but every single one of the 30 unemployed players I have worked with over the last three or four seasons now has a job."

"We have a very educated bunch of professional players — much more than any of our counterparts — with close to 70% having a third-level education. But just having that doesn't guarantee you a job. They might need to do work experience or postgraduate studies."

"Rugby players bring strong transferrable skills to an employer. On a weekly basis, they are reviewed,

they are used to being scrutinised, used to taking criticism, and used to working as part of a team. That's why so many guys go into business and sales."

One retired rugby player who benefited from Adams' advice is Frankie Sheahan, who called time on his career after suffering from an injury for months. He had set up Front Row Management a few months before his retirement and he now manages players such as Munster's Stephen Archer and Ian Nagle. He has also arranged commercial work for Tomás O'Leary and David Wallace.

"If you're inside the bubble of professional sport, it can be cocoon-like, in that you are so focused on what you're doing," Sheahan said.

"I would advise young players to prepare as much as they can for life outside the bubble. It can be counterproductive not to have any interests outside rugby and you have to make the most of the time you have after training."

"I knew the end was coming. But I always had an entrepreneurial spirit and had dabbled in business because my father was involved in residential and commercial property around Cork."

The transition out of sport can be significantly improved by preparation and education, Sheridan believes. He has long been determined to help sports people reinvent themselves.

In 2002, when he was studying sport science at Dublin City University, he set up a programme for young football players returning from the UK who found themselves ill-equipped for life off the pitch.

The six-week live-in programme,



Injury forced Sheahan to retire early; he now works as match analyst for Sky, and as player manager

which began the day of the 2002 World Cup, included a mix of IT training, sport-science education and career guidance. He is now about to start a PhD on athlete retirement to track the psychological changes over five to eight years in the 200 athletes on the Irish Institute of Sport's programme.

"We provide them with access to education, such as learning online, and help them to develop skills they can use for life after sport," he said. "It's about preventing the car crash before it happens."

"I was at a retirement planning conference recently and sitting in a workshop, where everyone around

me was 65," he said. "People were asking me why I was there, given that I was so young."

"When I mentioned I was a retired athlete, a debate kicked off about the concept of retirement in your thirties. But if you plan it properly, going into retirement from sport can be a seamless transition."

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