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ven during his playing days, Frankie Sheehan, the former Irish rugby international, was regarded as something of a Mr Fixit.

Need a hotel at short notice? Just ask Frankie.

Thinking of upgrading the motor? Frankie knows a guy who knows a guy.

Wondering about a mortgage? No problem, Frankie can make it happen.

I suppose I was always the guy that people called when they were stuck," said Sheehan. "A lot of the time, it was just about introducing one person to another person. For some reason, I suppose I was always the lad in the middle, the fellow making the introductions.

Now, the long-serving Ireland and Munster hooker is putting his middle-man talents to formal use. Just over six months after playing his last game for Munster, Sheehan is launching his own sports management agency, Front Row Entertainment.

The idea of setting up the agency has been swirling around in Sheehan's head for some time. In his playing days, he was "frustrated" with agents and representatives who only showed up to appear when it was time to renegotiate contracts.

"Sheehan felt he could do it better himself, leading to the launch of Front Row as a "one-stop shop for players." In addition to negotiating contracts and securing sponsorship deals, the company's services will include media training, business coaching, career guidance, wealth management, and sports psychology.

As a former player, Sheehan believes he is in a position to provide some of those services himself. He has also retained a team of external consultants who will work with Front Row's clients.

"We have experts in all areas, people who are top of their fields. We have lawyers, accountants, wealth managers. They are all lined up as consultants with the company.

"Players have massive commitments on their time. Our job is to make sure everything is sorted out for them professionally and financially. If they are happy on the pitch, they will play better on it."

"There has been quietly working on the venture for the past few months, signing up a number of players as clients and meeting potential sponsors. He has also sought advice from business figures, including Denis O'Brien and property developer Richard O'Ryan.

"When I finished, I made a decision to get straight into work and not to mess around. That decision really helped me to make the transition from leaving rugby," said Sheehan.

"It was not doing a whole pile. I would be sitting in a chair feeling sorry for myself. I have got great support. People such as Denis O'Brien have opened their door to me and given me a lot of advice. That is something you just can't buy."



CILLIAN KELLY

# Front Row for Frankie

Just six months after hanging up his boots, former rugby international Frankie Sheehan is about to launch his own sports management agency

A number of Sheehan's former team mates from his Munster and Ireland playing days have signed up with Front Row, including current Irish international Tomás O'Leary. David Wallace and Mick O'Driscoll. Sheehan will handle their commercial interests within Ireland.

Sheehan said he was close to signing up a number of rugby players from the other Irish provinces over the coming weeks, and is also looking at some other sports. Ruby Walsh, the champion stephane jockey, has signed up with Front Row, and Sheehan will negotiate sponsorship deals for all his clients, but will essentially manage their commercial interests.

"There is no set number of clients that I want to have," he said. "It is about making sure everybody is happy. I am quite happy with the group I have now, plus the few that are set to join. If I look after these guys well, my reputation will grow and people will come to me."

However, he insisted his role would be a world removed from the celebrity agent or publicist. Instead,

much of his time will be spent giving clients straight advice - whether about their performance on the pitch or their choice of club.

"It would not be all praise. There would be a lot of honesty," he said.

Sheehan acknowledged that securing large-scale sponsorship deals for his clients would be tough in the economic climate. He said it would be unrealistic for many low-profile or up-and-coming players to land big deals.

"I am not going to sit down and promise the sky and the stars. I have not given any false promises," he said. "But the commitment that I give to my guys is that I will be proactive and knock on every door. Expectations are lower because of the economic times. That is not an excuse. It is the way it is. But I am sowing the seeds now."

With money tight and sponsorship scarce, Sheehan said it was time to redefine the "sponsorship relationship" between a player and a company. He said the days were gone when a player could simply turn up for a photo shoot and leave with a cheque.

*"I am not going to sit down and promise the sky and the stars. I have not given any false promises,"*

Instead, he wants a situation where the player takes an active role for the company and the brand. He has already put this model into action himself, recently becoming a brand ambassador for the telecom company O2.

"My dream scenario is that some of my clients would become business ambassadors for their products. Not only do they endorse a product in ad campaigns, but they also sit in on meetings, meet customers and learn a lot themselves. At the end, both sides will get a lot out of it," said Sheehan, who believes that model can work for companies of all sizes. If you get the right player with you, it can push a business over the line, particularly small companies. We want the player and the company to grow and develop together," he said.

A key part of Sheehan's job is advising players on their choice of club. With only four professional rugby teams in Ireland, second-string players often have to move abroad to get game time. With contacts in clubs across Britain and France, Sheehan would be in a posi-

tion to advise a player on the merits of staying in Ireland or moving abroad.

"I looked at moving abroad last year, and I realised that I knew someone in every one of the English clubs and most of the French. I had a good base of contacts," he said.

There is obviously a good tax system in Ireland as well and it keeps guys here. Guys have to weigh up a lot of stuff if they are looking to move. Is it more important to play in their first rugby if they are not getting a snit of a game here? Or should they stay in Ireland and probably get paid more? These are the questions, and my job is to help them get their own answer."

Sheehan will also be helping his clients to prepare for life after sport. He played for 13 years but was forced to retire earlier this year due to a damaged chest muscle. He had a year-long contract waiting in France, but turned it down on medical advice.

As Sheehan sees it, he was one of the lucky ones - he was nearing the end of his career, had a degree under his belt and knew what he

<b>Frankie Sheehan</b>	
Managing director, Front Row Entertainment	
Age: 33	
Home: Cork	
Car: BMW	
Hobbies: golf, horse racing	
Currently reading: <i>Think and Grow Rich</i> by Napoleon Hill	
Background: Sheehan played for Munster 153 caps and was capped for Ireland 29 times	
<b>Front Row Entertainment</b>	
Established: 2009	
Location: Cork	
Shareholder: Frankie Sheehan	
Clients: Tomás O'Leary, Stephen Keogh, David Wallace, Denis Fogarty, Lifetime Mafi, Ruby Walsh and others	

wanted to do post-rugby.

"One of the things I want to do is to make sure people are ready after when they retire," he said. "Not just financially, because it does not matter how much money you have when you finish rugby, it can be a small amount or a big amount. But you need a focus when you finish, something that you want to do."

"You could win the Lotto in the morning and it would be all well and good. But there will come a time when you need something to give you a bit of purpose, something to do. The same applies to rugby players."

Outside sports management, the business will also facilitate guest speaking and media appearances. Since retiring from rugby, Sheehan has started working as a rugby commentator for RTE. He has also joined the after-dinner circuit, giving motivational speeches about his time with Munster and Ireland.

Sheehan said he hoped to source speaking functions for his other clients, while he also had access to speakers from politics, entertainment and business. "If you need someone to speak at a function, we can arrange it," he said.

Sitting in his office in Cork city, Sheehan seems to have made the adjustment from rugby professional to business professional with ease. But after winning Heineken Cups and playing in a World Cup, does he miss it?

"Not yet, anyway," he said. "In my early career I was a second-choice player with Munster and Ireland and I was not getting the stars. It becomes more and more difficult mentally to get yourself up for training."

"You train hard and you deal with a lot of disappointment. This adjustment with Munster and Ireland was not getting the stars. It becomes more and more difficult mentally to get yourself up for training."