

**Title of presentation: A Lifetime in Professional Sport****Ruth Wood-Martin RD MSc SENR**

In 2006, the Irish Rugby Football Union (IRFU) employed a full time Performance Nutritionist, whose role and purpose was 'to provide sport nutritional support to IRFU Professional and Academy players and to contribute to the IRFU player and coach education programmes'. This presentation tells the story of the development of performance nutrition services across Elite Player Pathways and professional rugby union programmes across the island of Ireland over a 16-year period (2006 – 2022).

Starting with an assessment of existing nutrition services in 2007 enabled the development of recommendations for the model of service delivery to ensure that evidence-based services were delivered by appropriately qualified and experienced practitioners. Engaging and educating decision makers of what Performance Nutritionists do to add value to performance programmes was key in securing the support to invest in the development of services across both the Men's and Women's game. Comprehensive review and feedback allowed for the programme to grow and show its value for coaches and players alike. As the number of service practitioners grew, so did the ability to be part of integrated multidisciplinary teams to provide player centred nutrition programmes that optimise health and maximise performance through robust rugby-specific strategies, policies and protocols. The progress aligned and was supported with improvements in the performance of the programme in the global rugby union landscape.

In 2006, there was one practitioner in this all island organisation. In 2023, there are 12 Performance Nutritionists with equity of accountability of other professional service providers across national and provincial systems. This growth of a comparable sustainable and integrated programme has not been seen elsewhere in rugby union. Performance Nutrition has become a stand-alone profession over this time and the IRFU were willing to invest in this. Lessons learnt, service challenges, career highlights and some luck along the way has made it an interesting journey in what sometimes did feel like a lifetime!