

Will Connors' Waterford Connections



Will Connors in action for Ireland on his Six Nations' debut versus Italy.

Jordan Norris

A Leinster and Ireland star, and a man of Stradbally roots – Will Connors' rise to prominence in recent weeks has been welcomed from all corners of the country.

The 24-year-old openside flanker starred on his Ireland debut in their Six Nations' victory over Italy, taking man-of-the-match accolades and seeing his performance rewarded with another cap against France in Paris on Saturday last.

His fledgling career has been curiously followed by all those in Stradbally, with dad Nick originally hailing from the Park area, and grandmother Peg Connors (82) synonymous with the locality. Waterford connections flow strongly through the Connors' lineage, with the Kildare-born forward also a cousin of Munster prop Jack O'Donoghue.

Renowned showjumper Francis Connors is also a cousin, and Will's father Nick told the Munster Express that the 24-year-old has never forgotten his roots. Having attended St. Augustine's College in Dungarvan himself, before embarking on a career in the army and establishing his own engineering company in 2002, Nick's life has been busy by all accounts, but the family do always try to get to Stradbally whenever time allows them to.

"We visit as often as we can. That said, my mother would probably tell you we don't visit as often as we should. When our children were teenagers, it was hard. We were up here and we had Will always playing rugby, his two sisters were horse riding and we were always away at something. It was hard then but we're getting down a lot more often in recent times, before the virus hit. It hasn't been as often as we'd like it to happen but still we try and get down here as frequently as we can."

Despite having left Waterford at a relatively young age, Nick says they still hold a strong contact pool in the Deise. He speaks regularly with his former classmates in the Friary college, while also keeping contact with friends from his own sporting background.

"We do keep in close contact with everyone. Tom Cunningham and Eoin O'Brien brought myself and Will on a tour of the new facilities at Stradbally GAA one of the last times we were down and that was really enjoyable. I played minor football with Eoin and often met him at race meetings too. My mother Peg is still very active in the village. I still connect with people, it is hard and you do lose touch. I'm in a WhatsApp group with some friends in Dungarvan, and again whenever the opportunity arises to meet we do our best to avail of it."

The U-20 Rugby World Cup in 2016 was a point in time where Will began to rise to prominence. That team had Ireland's greatest ever showing at a Rugby World Cup, defeating Wales, New Zealand and Georgia before beating Argentina and losing out to hosts England in the decider. Nick says the core of that team being involved at the senior grade now shows how much of a worthwhile experience that was.

“You only need to look to how many of that team were involved at the weekend to comprehend just how talented a group it was. Five of them were on the pitch at once – Will, Hugo Keenan, James Ryan, Andrew Porter and Jacob Stockdale. Jordan Larmour would have been involved if he wasn’t injured, and you have Shane Daly too. It’s almost unprecedented that that many from the one age group have come through to be involved, they’re a fantastic group.”

Best friends both on and off the field, a lot has been made of the connection between Connors and Keenan. Another Waterford connection lies, as Hugo’s mum comes from just outside Clonmel. According to Nick, for both families – the script couldn’t have gone any more according to plan.

“It was amazing for both Will and Hugo. They have had similar roots into the game, they’ve come through the Leinster academy and played sevens. Will was injured for quite some time and Hugo had an extra year in sevens. They both played probably the same amount of games for Leinster last year, and to get their first Irish cap was just super. I said to my neighbour the other day, we could not have written the script any better, it was the Carlsberg game with both of them getting tries too in such a comprehensive win.”

The open side flanker position is among the most competitive in the Irish squad, and for Connors to be given the nod ahead of the likes of Josh van der Flier is a nod to the wealth of ability the Stradbally descendant possesses. Despite the competitive nature, the group are all friends and push one another on.

“They’re all friends within the group despite the competition, they bring out the best in one another. Will has been stronger having come back from injury. Hugh Hogan works with forwards and skills. Hugh’s aunt lives in Waterford City too. The time with Hugh and the one-to-one’s have been hugely beneficial to his game. He had a difficult time with that injury, but he stayed positive and didn’t wallow in it. He finished his Computer Science degree in UCD (University College Dublin) with the spare time, and had more time with the coaches and came back stronger. He didn’t wallow, and it actually turned out to be a silver lining of sorts.”

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought an abrupt halt to spectatorship at both casual and elite sporting events, and Nick admits that it was a pity that he and family were not present to witness Will’s Irish debut at the Aviva Stadium. Despite not being there physically, he praised the IRFU for their excellent efforts in involving them with the group.

“It was a pity that we couldn’t be there. We have been there in the past on so many days. We were present for Max Deegan’s debut and felt that washed off on us in a way and we dreamed that Will would follow. Max’s granny lives just up the road from us in Donadea. Sadly, COVID got in the way but the IRFU and the camp got in touch with the family ahead of the capping ceremony on that Thursday. We had the grandmothers, both Peg and Caroline’s mother, Deirdre in Monkstown send Will their well wishes and we put seven clips together which were played at the ceremony. It was great for us to be connected in some way.”

In terms of the game itself, it was difficult for the family to gather as they are scattered across all corners of the globe. Improvisation was implemented and Zoom became the host of the family’s final whistle musings.

“We were planning a Zoom call for the game itself, I’ve got two sisters in America – one in Houston and one in San Francisco. We were thinking of setting it up pre-match but I might of been too uptight, I could hardly speak! We got together properly post-match and it was great banter. Will rang us while he was giving a urine sample too. We just made the most of it in whatever way we could. It was sad that we couldn’t be there but what was more important to all of us was that he got his cap and justified his selection.”

Dealing with newfound attention has been little problem for Connors, as he has remained level-headed and knows the sacrifices made by both himself and others to afford him the position he now holds. He is adamant that he will enjoy the moments, as in rugby sometimes there can be more bad than good. His grandfather would have been incredibly proud to see him represent his country, given his own rugby history.

“My father was part of the Connors Homestead. As the oldest son, farming took centre stage for him. He used to be collected in a taxi by Cork Con for games with two others, but farming brought an end to his rugby career. Cork Con wanted him to move up and get a job up there but those were different times. We know he’d of been smiling down with pride on Will.”

For now, the Connors family are taking each day as it comes. They know that Will has all the ability but also respect that there is an element of luck involved. There is no fear that he will rest on his laurels, and the hope is that more caps will follow in future. When the pandemic ends, a trip to Stradbally is the first thing on the family agenda.

“We normally head down to Stradbally at Christmas and hopefully the restrictions will allow for that. We had a great turnout for the Munster game last December in Thomond Park. My brother is an avid Munster fan and he got into a spot of trouble with Will’s grandmother when he turned up in his Munster jacket and hat. She’s been a turncoat in recent times and donned the blue for her grandson. I think the hat ended up in the bin! When the green jersey is on, the support is unanimous and we look forward to hopefully having more of those days.”

At just 24-years-old, the world lies at the feet of Will Connors. As put by Gavin Cumiskey of the Irish Times: “The former Clongowes openside can take that tackle technique anywhere in the world and get paid to play rugby.” Wherever the story goes, it will be keenly followed in West Waterford quarters.