The Irish Rugby Football Union, Ulster Branch (also known as Ulster Rugby) is one of four branches of the IRFU, and is responsible for rugby union in Ulster. Since rugby union became a professional sport in 1995, the Ulster team now plays as a professional club. The branch is also responsible for the Ulster team, which plays in national and international competitions.

In the BA (Hons) Liberal Arts Physical Education modules, coaching techniques and styles play a major role in the practical and theoretical elements of the course. During his placement with Ulster Rugby, Mr Paddy Tally was able to introduce new skills as well as enhance his own skills in this field through the process of coaching demonstration and application.

Paddy spent a period of time working with the Ulster Academy squad by travelling around the various schools, colleges and clubs visiting the players. Each season approximately 20 players, having met the strict selection criteria, are selected to take part in the academy. Paddy, within this professional environment, became informed on the aim of the academy to produce holistically better rugby players. His involvement in the following on-field and off-field aspects of being an elite rugby player were invaluable: fitness (aerobic and anaerobic); strength; nutrition and hydration; awareness of drugs, alcohol and steroids; life as a professional rugby player; mental preparation and goal setting; general ball skills and body position; individual positional coaching; video analysis and understanding and awareness of all rugby rules.

During his term of placement Paddy was linked with Mr Mark McCall, Director of Coaching who facilitated a full range of experiences through his network of contact within Ulster Rugby.

**KEY LEARNING POINTS ON BUSINESS**

During his term of placement Paddy also had the opportunity to become familiar with a range of management and administration operations at Ulster Rugby. Techniques in raising revenue through advertising and the management of relationships with corporate sponsors including public relations and media related issues were explained in detail. An observation of the work carried out by the Marketing Team revealed the intricate process of aligning merchandising and ticketing with the match programme.

Paddy indicated many discussions allowed for a comparison between the running of a professional sports organisation as compared to the approach taken to the management and administration structures common to the network of amateur Gaelic football clubs.

**POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTION TO THE BA (Hons) LIBERAL ARTS DEGREE PROGRAMME OF THE UNIVERSITY**

An observation of the way coaching and player development is undertaken in a professional environment will contribute very significantly to related elements of BA (Hons) Liberal Arts Physical Education modules. Paddy has indicated that a number of BA (Hons) Liberal Arts graduates have moved into coaching and sports development as a career. Paddy stated: “I feel that the knowledge and experience gained in the area of player development will enable me to highlight the advantages of the approach adopted by Ulster Rugby to elite player development.”

Shadowing the work of ‘strength and conditioning’ coaches has given an
in-depth knowledge and understanding of how a series of tests are designed to identify the underlying cause of a skill deficiency. This experience will be directly relevant to guiding BA (Hons) Liberal Arts students who may consider post-graduate qualifications in this field of expertise.

Contact with the network of rugby Development Officers will hopefully facilitate the introduction of rugby to the 'games course' currently followed by students following Physical Education modules at the college.

FUTURE LINKS WITH BUSINESS

Direct contact with the Ulster Squad is unlikely due to the professional team environment only being suited to the nature of contact made possible through the terms of the 'Enabling Lecturers to Learn from Business' project. However, the opportunity to maintain relations with the Development Officers operating at school and college level will be explored.

PEACE AND RECONCILIATION

Paddy’s term of placement at Ulster Rugby provided an opportunity for an exchange of expertise associated with two sports from different traditions in Northern Ireland. When Mr Neil Doak: Ulster Rugby Elite Player Development Manager was asked to comment on the benefits of having Paddy on placement he commented:

“There are a number of areas where I feel the crossover from the sports has a mutual benefit. The one area in particular in a playing point of view is the way in which the Gaelic players are coached about spatial awareness. In Rugby we encourage a lot of contact in the game, whereas in Gaelic football the players are coached to be agile, avoid contact and use the space much more effectively. The speed at which the Gaelic players move the ball in play provides lots of opportunities to attack through spaces and then support in numbers, we could learn a lot from this. The anticipatory skills developed by the Gaelic players are another area where I feel we could learn from. Gaelic football has developed a very strong system within the schools in Ulster. The way the development programmes have been designed to work, supported by teachers, is of a very high standard and something we have not had the same level of success with. The marketing of schools Gaelic football is excellent with close links to local as well as national press, television and radio. The top players in Gaelic spend a lot of time promoting and supporting the schools' competitions and this is of great benefit to the future development of the sport.”

As a direct result of Paddy's association with Neil, an event to promote Gaelic/Rugby Transferable Skills took place at the Mid Ulster Sports Arena, Cookstown. The event was a marked success and was merited in the local press.

PERSONAL LEARNING

Paddy stated: “The placement gave me an opportunity to experience an environment with which I have had a long held fascination. I became informed on the day-to-day running of the organisation as well as the impact it has on the wider public. I worked alongside a very committed and motivated bunch of people. Overall, I would recommend this project to any lecturer.”