

# My Limerick

Paul O'Connell talks to MARY DUNDON



## Captain Fantastic keeps his feet firmly on the ground

**B**RINGING the Heineken Cup back to Limerick again this rugby season is the main goal of Munster's new captain Paul O'Connell.

"You want to bring it back as many times as you can with a homegrown team. I think it is brilliant that kids can look up to homegrown talent that stays at home," says Paul.

And the Munster rugby squad do most of their training at the University of Limerick Arena.

"We are here. We are using Irish coaching methods and Irish facilities and it is really Irish. Munster rugby is like having the Premiership at home," he says.

But professional rugby has also brought a downside for many clubs with ordinary members complaining they cannot get tickets to the big matches because a large section are now being reserved for the corporate sector.

Paul believes it is a question of finding a happy medium between

Limerick is brilliant, there are so many students and young people.

"You look at Limerick the weekend of a Munster game it is an unbelievable place to be—you could nearly take a holiday here in the middle of winter from a Friday to Sunday evening, it is just an incredible weekend," says Paul.

Asked how he reacts when Limerick is labelled with the clichéd tag of Stab City, Paul says that he just brushes it off.

"I think the more we pay attention to it the more people will use it to incite you to react. I think Limerick people know there is only a small minority involved in crime. But outsiders want to make it out that it is standard operation throughout the city. That's their problem, but it is not something that I let bother me," he replies.

"I am very, very proud of Limerick because I know what Limerick is really like. If I felt they were right I would probably end



## Questions & Answers

**What made you so interested in rugby?**

My dad, Michael, played at senior level with Young Munster and was involved at committee level and even with building the clubhouse at Derryknockane.

We would have had a big attachment to Young Munster and my brother, Justin, played with them; my other brother, Marcus, played with Old Crescent.

**What is your first memory of playing rugby?**

My first memory was playing in the Young Munster seven-a-side tournament when I was eight, nine and 10 on lovely summer days. We won it one year and my pal, Trevor Nix, was on my team.

**What was your reaction to being selected the Munster rugby team captain?**

It is a big honour. There are so many big personalities, so many guys who could do the job. It is a nice compliment to be asked to do it.

**Frank McCourt said that Limerick should be named the Rugby City of Ireland. Do you agree?**

No one would doubt

although, hopefully, that is going to be sorted out.

**What has been the highlight of your career?**

There are several

beat South Africa and the two triple crown wins.

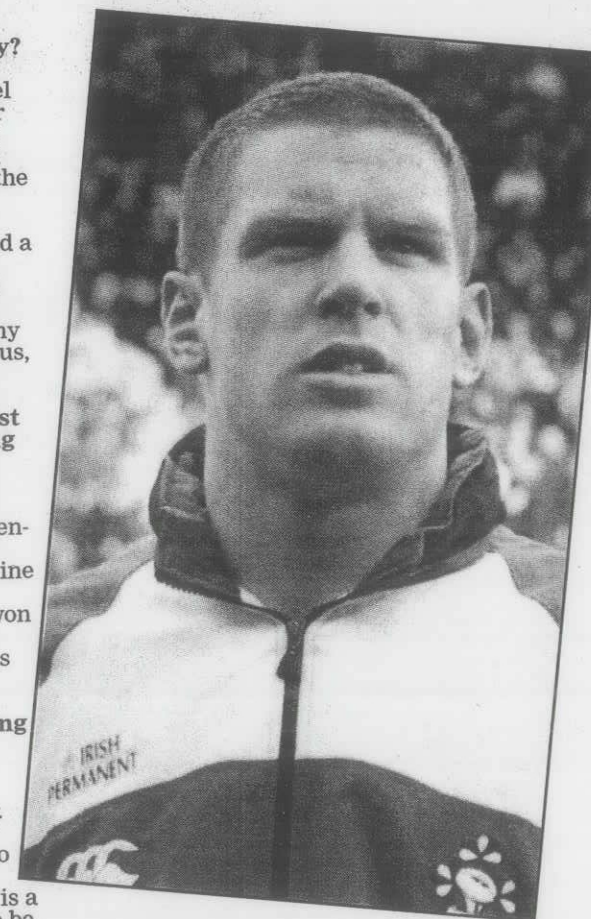
**Is rugby training tough?**

Most of us you are looking at putting in six or seven hours a day but a lot of that might be on the video, getting massage, physiotherapy or rehab from injuries.

The hard training with weights and running might be three or four hours a day. The day before the match we might just have a 45 minute routine.

**You are good golfer playing off a handicap of 7. Did you ever want to be a professional?**

Oh yes when I was





clubs with primary members complaining they cannot get tickets to the big matches because a large section are now being reserved for the corporate sector.

Paul believes it is a question of finding a happy medium between balancing the books and getting children into playing rugby.

"You have to raise money, but on the other hand if you don't have the young players coming through you end up having to buy in players from outside and you lose out the other way. It is a fine line that you have to balance and it is what the Munster branch have to do," he says.

Winning the Heineken Cup with the Munster rugby team in May was definitely the high point of Paul O'Connell's career to date. And shots of thousands of Limerick fans watching the match on the big screen definitely lifted the team's spirits at vital moments during the final against Biarritz.

"I think Limerick came out of it so well. There was no hassle on the street and the city looked brilliant. They should definitely put up the big screen again," he says.

The Munster team were surprised and delighted to see thousands of fans turn out again the next day in the pouring rain for the Limerick homecoming parade.

And despite being crowned the kings of European rugby, Paul and entire Munster squad have remained firmly grounded and in touch with the local supporters.

"I don't know how it would go to your head. It is lovely to have people supporting you and pat you on the back. It is strange to hear people say that a lot of the boys are still very down to earth.

"We are all still living at home, most of us still have all the friends that we grew up with—not a whole lot has changed for us," he points out.

Paul O'Connell is very proud of his city and says that in the rugby world Limerick is where young people want to come.

"There is a massive buzz and a great social scene here. My rugby friends in Cork and Dublin think

throughout the city. That's a problem, but it is not something that I let bother me," he replies.

"I am very, very proud of Limerick because I know what Limerick is really like. If I felt they were right I would probably end up reacting to it," he says.

Being selected as the new Munster captain is a big honour for Paul and a huge endorsement by his fellow team mates because they have the main say in choosing the new captain.

"It is a massive job ever since Mick Galwey started doing it. He brought such credibility and integrity to the job. He was a brilliant motivator and a brilliant player for Munster," he says.

Jim Williams then took over the Munster team captaincy and put his mark on it, and when Anthony Foley succeeded him as captain, he brought the team on again, according to Paul.

"Basically they have handed down a very big job and a very big honour and a very important role in the whole running and motivation of the team.

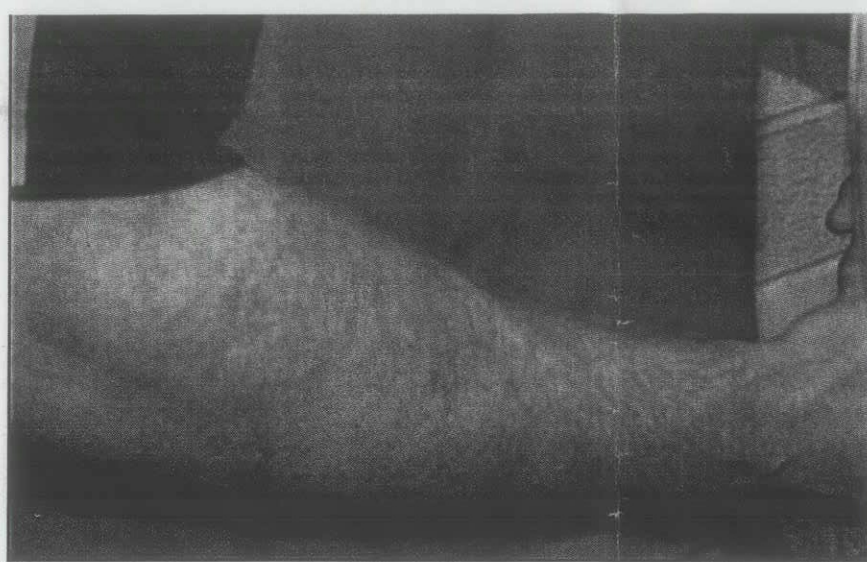
"It is a massive job and one that I am really delighted to do and when you look at the others—Anthony, Jim and Mick Galwey—who have been captain while I was there. Just to be mentioned in the same light as them is fabulous."

Paul is facing a busy season as Munster captain with the team competing in the European Cup and Magners League and also as a member of the Irish team facing into the Six Nations championship.

Next year the Irish squad will be facing another World Cup challenge and Paul believes Ireland have a better chance of winning it in 2007 with a young fit squad.

"It is probably the best opportunity for Ireland to win the World Cup. I think we will be very disappointed if we don't make a big impression," he says.

Paul inherited his love of rugby from his dad, Michael, who played with Sunday's Well in Cork before moving to Limerick and playing with



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Young Munster.

"We would have had a big attachment to Young Munster. My dad was involved at committee level and with building the clubhouse at Derryknockane and my brother, Justin, played with them.

And Young Munster's was also where Paul got his first taste of rugby playing first in their seven-a-side summer tournaments.

"I grew up with rugby really. I played U10 and U12 with Young Munster and I didn't play seriously again until I was about 16 when I started playing with Ard-Scoil Ris. I got a few lucky breaks from there," he recalls.

One of those lucky breaks was being on the Young Munster senior team who won the All-Ireland League and this was the springboard that got Paul a place on the Munster team five years ago.

Since then he has become a major force on the Munster and Irish rugby teams, winning several man-of-the-match titles.

Paul has sustained quite a few injuries so far in his career, so how long more does he hope to play?

"You would be doing well in this day and age, with the intensity of

the games, if you got 10 years out of it," he believes.

He has already completed three years of a Computer Science degree course in the University of Limerick. Would he plan to finish that?

"I am not too sure yet what I will do. It is very hard to tell, I have a few ideas, but I am not too sure at the moment," he says.

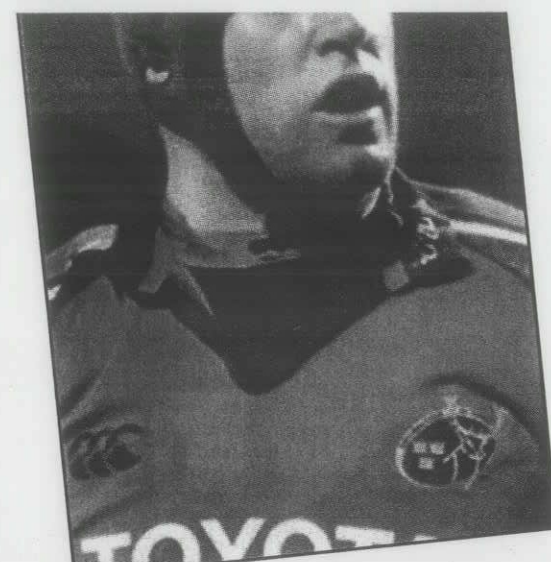
On thing for sure is that whatever Paul O'Connell takes on he will display the same excellent leadership and team motivating skills that he has shown with the Munster rugby team.

And these were skills that were evident even from a very early age when he worked in Gleeson's supermarket in Catherine Street as a teenager at weekends.

John Gleeson recalls that when that he left the 16-year-old Paul in charge of the shop on a Sunday, everything would be in order on his return.

"I put him in charge of a staff of 32 and I could trust him to run the place smoothly, and when I would come back all the tills would balance and everything would be perfect," he says.

Mary Dundon is communications executive with Limerick Co-Ordination Office.



that we are the Rugby City of Ireland, for such a small place, so many successful senior clubs and then so many internationals, I don't think anyone would argue with it.

But Munster has two big cities and players from all the other counties and that is probably the reason why we are so well supported.

What is the best thing about Limerick?

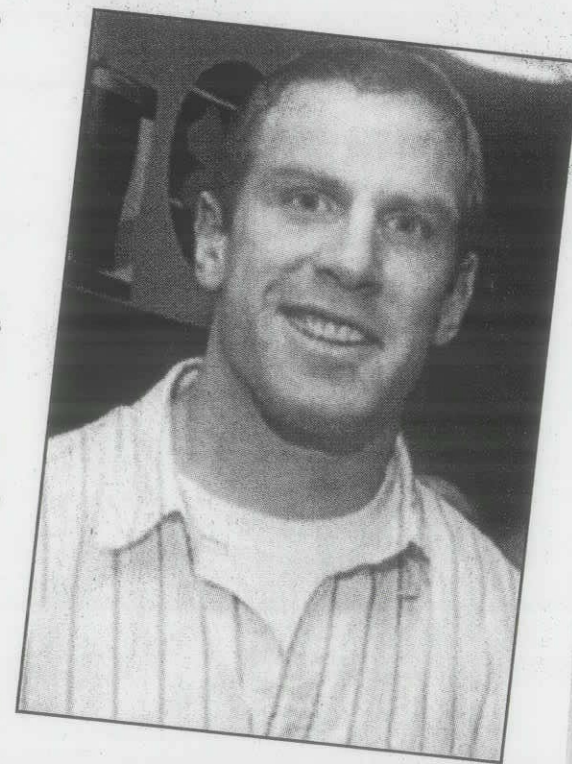
One of them is the rugby scene. It is massive and brilliant and great to know that your city and county is the best in the country at something—and the best in the country by a long ways. I am very proud of that.

The other best thing about Limerick for someone my age, is the social scene. It is just brilliant.

What's Limerick's weakest point?

The traffic annoys me sometimes, for such a small city the river causes difficulties, there is no crossing over from the Coonagh side,

highlights. Winning the Heineken Cup is the obvious one. Being on the Irish rugby team that beat England three years ago, being on the second Irish team to



match we might just have a 45 minute routine.

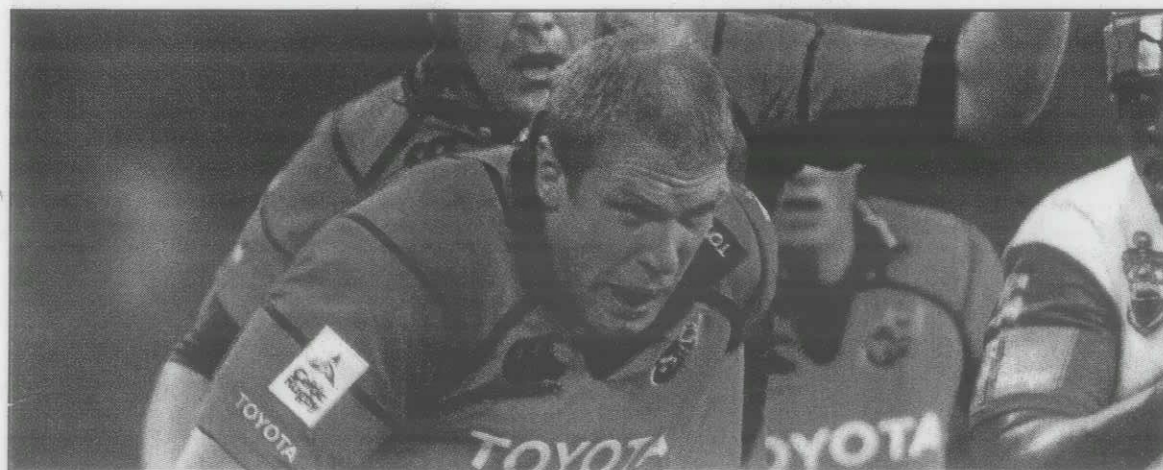
You are good golfer playing off a handicap of 7. Did you ever want to be a professional?

Oh yes, when I was young that was all I wanted to do. But I hit a wall when I was about 16 and started playing more rugby when I was studying for Leaving Cert. I lost interest in it for a few years, but I got it back this year and I am playing quite a bit at Limerick Golf Club.

Who would be your heroes in sport?

Mainly all the Irish athletes, all the rugby players: Peter Clohessy because he was with my club; Ger Earls because he was in my club, and after that the Irish golfers, Harrington, Clarke, McGinley, and athlete Sonia O'Sullivan

## FACTFILE:



Name: Paul O'Connell  
Claim to Fame: New Captain of Munster Rugby Team

Age: 26  
Address: Annacotty, County Limerick  
Parents: Michael and Sheagh O'Connell and two brothers, Justin and Marcus.

School and college: Ard-Scoil Ris, Limerick and the University of Limerick

Rugby achievements: 2006: new captain of Munster rugby team, a huge

endorsement from players, manager and trainers; 2005: member of Lions rugby tour; 2003: member of the Irish rugby team that got to the quarter finals in the World Cup championship; Won several man of the match titles; Texaco Sports Award for rugby; world class second row rugby player

Other sports: Excellent golfer and swimmer. As a member of Limerick Golf Club he plays off a handicap of 7.

