

Bernard Jackman

After thirteen years of a passionate fight on the field, rugby hero Bernard Jackman has hung up his boots and said goodbye to his days of playing professional rugby.

By putting his body on the line for his sport, Jackman suffered multiple concussions, 'stingers' and other injuries which, ultimately, convinced him to quit the game.

In an effort to raise awareness on the issue of Concussion, and further educate fellow sports people about the dangers of compound concussions, Bernard Jackman has become an acting ambassador for Acquired Brain Injury Ireland, standing strongly behind the concussion awareness campaign; ***Mind Your Head in Sport***



"I believe I have sustained over twenty concussions over the past three years' but to drop out would have been a sign of weakness..."

Bernard Jackman will never forget the first time he got badly concussed. It was 2004, he was playing for Connaught and the game was flowing as normal. Then – bang! He sustained the sort of hit that is now commonplace in top level rugby, but he didn't see it coming.

The Carlow man was initially knocked unconscious and when he came to, he was on a stretcher, being spirited from the pitch. He would take no further part in the match.

The side effects lasted three weeks – his head hurt so badly he had to put blackout blinds up in his room. A sliver of light would cause him unspeakable pain.

Now, six months after retiring, he is counting the cost of the cut and thrust of one of the world's most physical sports. As an Ireland international, and Heineken Cup winner with Leinster, he has an enviable CV. But the success came at quite a price to his body.

By Bernard's reckoning he was concussed 22 times in the final three years of his career. The 'knocks' as rugby players euphemistically call concussion – came in the course of matches and training. Occasionally he forced himself to continue playing and didn't tell the medical staff of his predicament.

"When you're playing, there's a feeling of invincibility", Jackman, now director of rugby at Clontarf RFC says.

"You can't let yourself have negative thoughts, because you're so focused on your goals and your team goals. Concussion can't get in the way of that".

Yet when Jackman thinks about how frequently he suffered head injuries, the 34 year old can't help but feel concerned. As genial off the pitch as he was ferocious on it, he knows his long term health could be compromised.

"It's an honour to play for my country and for Leinster and I have some fantastic memories, so I feel the toll on my body was worth it, he says. "But what if a few years down the line I am diagnosed with dementia or another brain disease. Will it have been worth it then?"

Concerns that rugby has become too dangerous were raised this week by the medical teams employed by England and Wales. They came after studies revealed that rugby union is now the most dangerous team sport in the world.

It is the nature of the injuries that disturbs James Robson, Scotland's doctor and the senior medical figure on the 2009 Lions tour to South Africa. "We simply don't know what state players will be in when they quit playing ", he says. "The injuries are bigger. I love rugby, I think it is the best team sport in the world, but it's been adversely affected by the concentration on injuries. Behind the statistics these guys are all husbands, brothers, and fathers, they're flesh and blood".

Jackman believes rugby's ferociousness is increasing to the point where a player could be killed in the course of a top level game. "It is possible, yes. There have been lucky escapes when you think about spear-tackles and head-stamping offences. The thing is, when you're in the thick of action you just don't think about what could go wrong.

Jackman detailed his numerous injuries in an autobiography, Blue Blood, which was published last year. His revelations lifted the lid on a culture where players play through injury for fear of being dropped or not having professional contracts renewed.

Since it came out, he has received correspondence from amateur rugby players who identified with his description of bad concussion.

"It's not just pain like a migraine, but longer term problems like mood swings. There's a culture in rugby where concussion isn't taken as seriously as it should be by the players – in training when someone is left reeling, other players often joke and laugh about it.

Jackman didn't just hide the pain he was suffering from Leinster, but also from his wife Sinead. "I didn't want to worry her", he says "My mother couldn't watch the matches. It's harder for people looking on".

"Like most of the other front-line forwards I kept this information to myself as much as possible. Forwards like me get a bang, get dizzy and spend two or three minutes trying to get our senses back together. It's scary losing balance for a while like that but, after you get enough concussions you get used to it, and you enter a strange place called 'self-denial'. You accept that this is a normal, somewhat acceptable, part of your working life. The headaches. The sickness which follows. You know you have to get on with it. It's work. So you pop some tablets more frequently than you know you should, and if it means heading straight home after games in order to get to a dark room and get to sleep, then that is what you do".

Bernard Jackman believes players' longevity will be reduced due to injury. "The guys who are 19 and 20 now are facing into a situation where they're unlikely to be playing at the age of 30. They're probably going to experience a game that's even more physically demanding than the one that evolved during my career – and the injuries are likely to be a hell of a lot worse".

"At the end of the day we are not honest with ourselves and we are not honest with our medics. Contact is part and parcel of a rugby player's preparation, but every time I make contact, I am risking a head injury and that's something that should not be happening", stressed Jackman.

"I've read more about head injuries in the last twelve months than ever before. I've read where the effects of concussions are cumulative and how one concussion leaves you more vulnerable for a second concussion, and so on. I am living evidence of this". "We must educate our young players of tomorrow about the effects, signs and symptoms of concussion. If we shine a light on this issue I believe we can in fact make a difference, allowing our players learn from the mistakes of others".

Bernard Jackman, March 2011