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An Intercounty Ladies Football and Camogie Player's View

Let's Make Things Better



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Why do this survey?

Ladies football and camogie are the two biggest female sports in Ireland with participation opportunities facilitated throughout the lifespan. Adult intercounty players represent the elite performers in their sport in their respective counties but little is known about what it actually entails to be an athlete at this level. Reports suggest these athletes are committed, disciplined, ambitious individuals who make considerable sacrifices and experience emotional and physical challenges in their career but this is largely based on individual accounts. Therefore, the purpose of this survey was to gather information about the experiences of intercounty players and about their perceptions of player welfare issues, using a nationally representative sample of ladies football and camogie players.

How was this survey carried out?

A survey link was emailed to individual players nationwide across both codes of ladies football and camogie. Players were asked a number of specific closed questions in relation to their playing experience and player welfare and were also invited to share relevant personal experiences.

Who took part in the survey?

A total of 586 players across all counties and all adult grades responded to this survey representing an approximate 60% response rate. The majority of players were employed and reported having some or complete third level education. Just over one third of respondents received a sports scholarship at third level. The average age of respondents was 23 years. On average, players had represented their county for 6.5 years overall, starting their career at approximately aged 17 years. A number of dual players responded to the survey and reported combining both sports for an average of two years to a maximum of 14 years.

Table 1: Personal Profile of Respondents

		%
Sport	Camogie	41.2
	Ladies Football	50.7
	Dual Players	8.1
Employment	Employed	56.1
	Unemployed	2.7
	Still Studying	41.2
Education	Complete Second Level	15.7
	Some/Complete Third Level	84.3
Scholarships	Yes	38.2
	No	61.8

What are the playing commitments of players?

In the current year, players represented on average three teams while 18% were members of more than four teams. As indicated in Table 2 , the majority of players trained with their club at least weekly (45% attended club training more than once per week) as well as attending at least three intercounty sessions per week. Furthermore, approximately 80% of players engaged in additional fitness and skills training at least once per week while a similar proportion tailor their diet (cook separate meals, take supplements, purchase special foods/ drinks) to maximize performance. A quarter of players travel more than 40km for training, this increases to 61% during non-Summer time. Almost three quarters (73%) of players reported having access to a regular training facility.

Table 2: Playing Profile of Players

		%
Train with Club Weekly	No	14.5
	Yes	85.5
Frequency of County Sessions	1-2 times/wk	13.6
	3+ times/wk	86.4
Duration of County Sessions	1-1.5 hours	69.6
	1.5+ hours	30.4
Individual Preparation	Fitness	85.4
	Skills	81.5
	Injury Management	51.7
	Dietary Modification	77.7
Travel Commitment	<20km	37.7
	21-40km	36.1
	>41km	26.2

A number of players recorded their training diary for an average week mid-championship illustrating the daily commitment of an intercounty player.

Table 3: Case Studies – Weekly Training Schedule

	Intercounty Ladies Footballer	Intercounty Camogie Player
Monday	Gym Session/Individual Training	Swim (Recovery)/Physio
Tuesday	Club Training/Gym Session	Goalie Session
Wednesday	County Training	County Training (travel to Cork)/Gym Session
Thursday	Rest	Rest/Goalie Session
Friday	County Training	Travel to Cork
Saturday	Club/County Game	County Game
Sunday	County Training/Recovery	Club Training

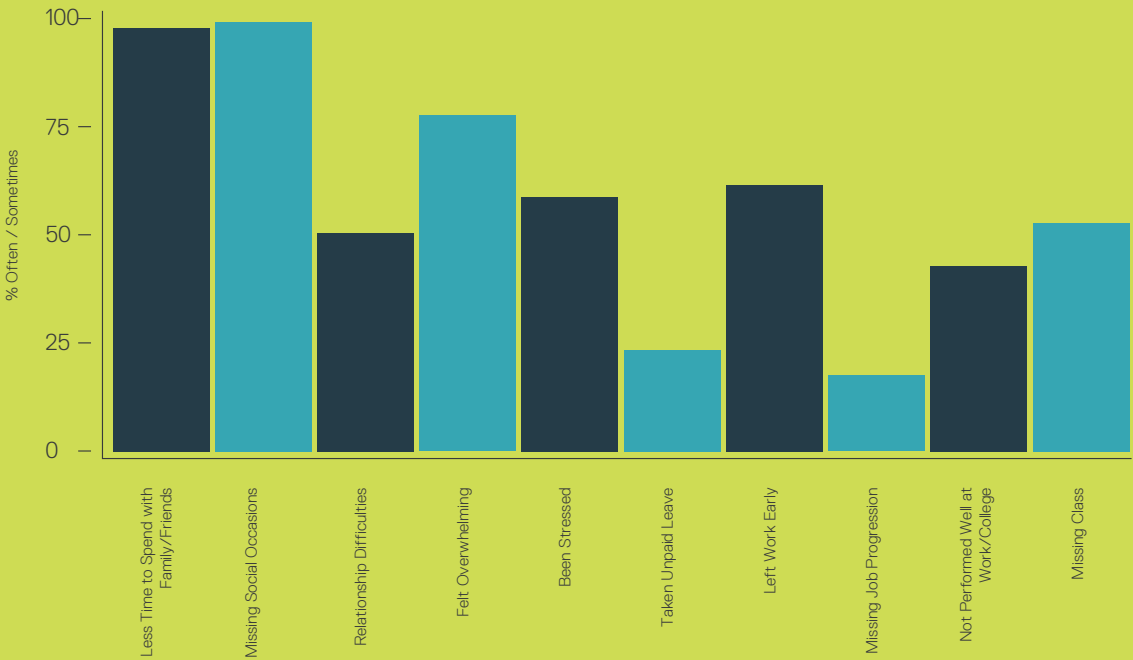


What are the main welfare issues for players?

Emotional, Occupation and Social Challenges

As indicated in Figure 1, intercounty players experience many challenges in their lives as a result of their playing commitments. Almost all players have less time to spend with family and friends and frequently miss social occasions, with lower proportions (approximately 50%) reporting an effect on their relationships and their work and college responsibilities. Of note also is that almost 80% of players have felt overwhelmed, and 60% have felt stressed as an intercounty player.

Figure 1: Challenges Experienced by Players





A number of players in personal accounts highlighted the emotional and mental difficulties they have encountered:

“My sport impacts on all aspects of life. I find it hard at times to juggle my sport, my career and personal life in the height of Championship. Due to living away from your home county the amount of travelling can take its toll. Physically, mentally and financially.”

“It was the lack of mental and emotional support I received during my injury that was the worst. At the time I was having trouble... it (sport) was the only thing that was keeping me sane and then that was taken from me. That's life and I'm lucky to be head strong enough to get through it and know that I'll be back stronger and better but I fear for people who aren't.”

“From January to May I found it very tough to balance sport and college. I feel I could have got on better in college if I wasn't as tired from all the training, also training sessions took up a huge amount of time and I always had to plan projects, group meetings around them.”

“When I injured my knee... it was overwhelming while also suffering the mental draining disappointment of a cruciate injury. Support of any kind to assist me during this time would've been of great help. I was struggling with a busy college schedule. I am now three months post injury and still going through everything alone. I would love to see a care package or psychologist made available for those who suffer from long term injury. Just to help them and reassure them that they're still a valued member of the panel and their recovery and efforts are being recognized.”

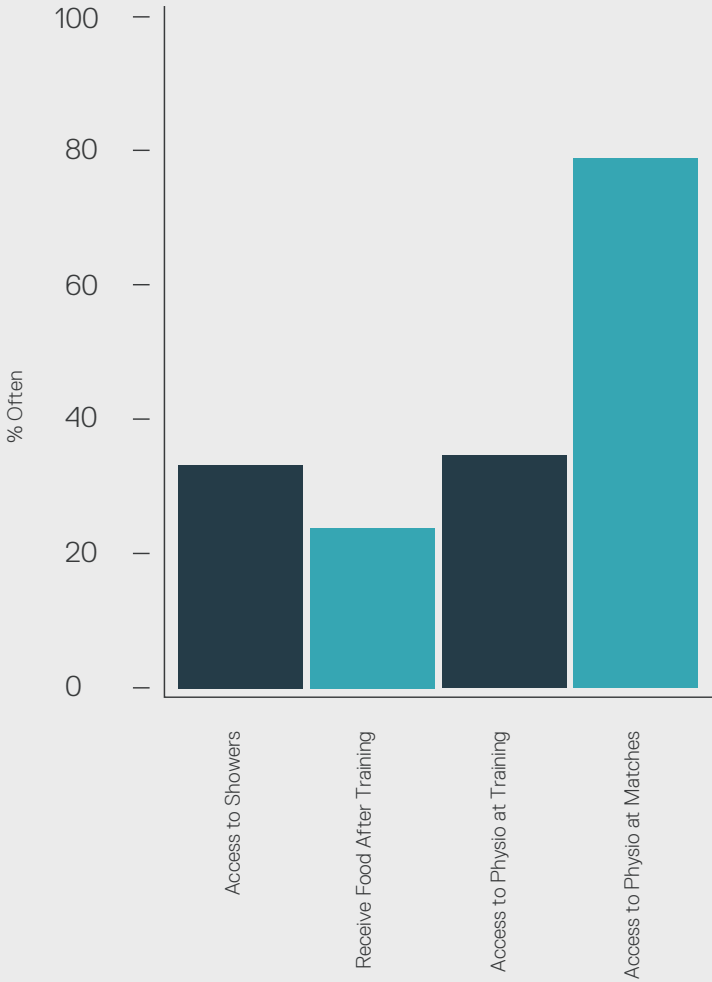
“As an (athlete) I feel indispensable. Eventually, I decided to leave the panel as it was impacting hugely on college life, my relationships and my emotional welfare. I think this is appalling. Are we less entitled to support because we are female?”

Physical Wellbeing

A small proportion of players (6%) have taken part in health screening as an intercounty player while 17% have had some type of injury screening. Approximately half have had access to a fitness assessment and dietitian services. As indicated in Figure 2, approximately 33% of players often have access to hot showers at training; a further 33% reported that they sometimes have hot shower facilities. About half of players often or sometimes receive food after training while regular access to physiotherapy services at training is lower than that at matches. Almost 60% of players have completely free access to a physiotherapist.



Figure 2: Factors Influencing Physical Wellbeing of Players





Financial Implications

Almost 7% of respondents indicated that they receive expenses for travelling to training; remuneration ranged between 18 and 30c per mile. Three quarters of the respondents had experienced an injury at some stage during their career with 43% indicating that they had to take time off work/college due to that injury. A large proportion of players (62%) did not receive payment for expenses associated with their injuries. A similar proportion (63%) indicated they had been 'out of pocket' on some occasion due to county commitments, particularly due to injury while 88% of camogie players buy their own hurls. To cover many of the costs associated with intercounty teams, 82% of players reported taking part in their own fundraising for gear, food, travel expenses etc. while approximately 16% of players have previously received some form of sponsorship or financial reward due to their playing status.

Current Status of Intercounty Players and Player Welfare

Players were asked to consider their status in the media, general and sporting populations. Almost half of the respondents agree that they are respected in a sporting context while 20% feel a similar level of acknowledgement exists in the general environment. There is also a very clear level of discontent with the level of media coverage allocated to intercounty players and their sport. A number of players remarked on an overall lack of recognition and support for female intercounty players:

'I feel female sports players get very little recognition for what they do'

'It's just disappointing that the effort and sacrifices you make are not recognized by your own county'

'Little coverage/respect given to ladies teams'

'I play and coach camogie as I love the game but when you do not get acknowledgement..it's very hard'

Table 4: Perceptions of Players and Player Welfare

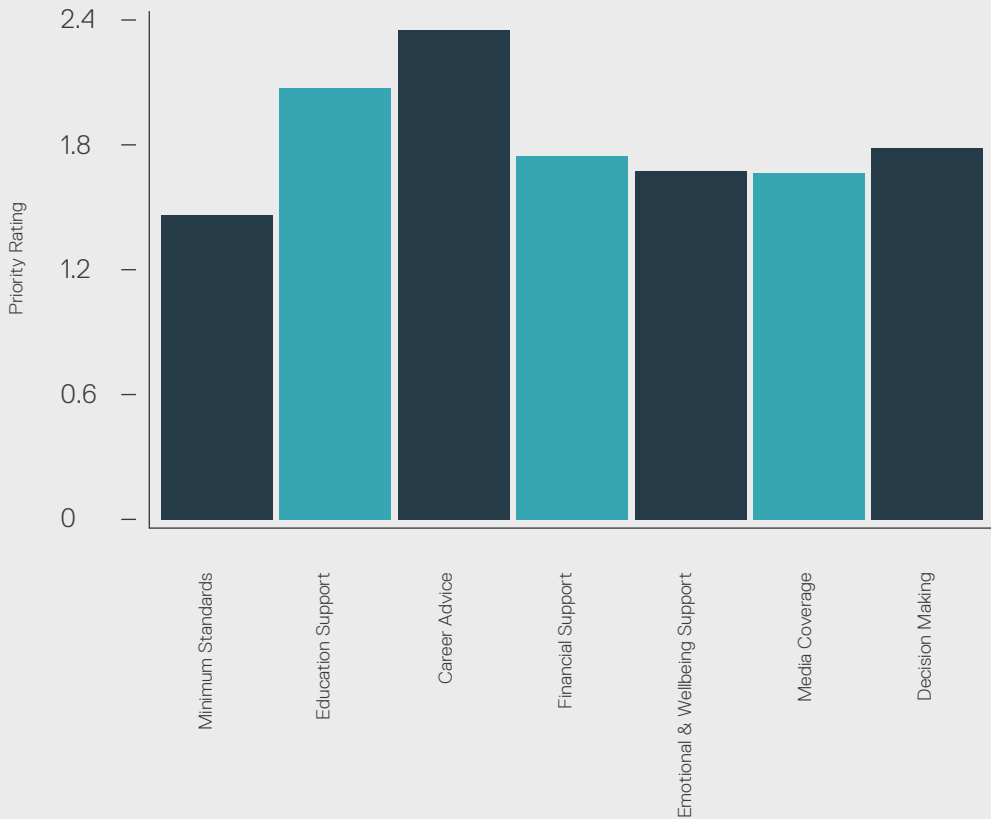
	% Agree	% Disagree
Intercounty players receive enough media coverage	3.9	91.4
Intercounty players are respected as athletes by the general population	21.3	67.8
Intercounty players are respected as athletes by the sporting population	46.7	37.7
Intercounty players have access to support services for player welfare such as counselling, career advice, education support	4.1	82.9
Intercounty players are involved at decision making at county board level	5.3	77.4
Intercounty players are involved in decision making at national level	3.4	73
Currently, the player welfare of intercounty players is being sufficiently looked after	6.1	73

Also, 73-83% of players disagree that player welfare is currently being sufficiently considered and catered for while approximately three quarters feel that players are not involved at decision making regionally or nationally. Just over one third (38%) of players are aware that they have a team liaison officer.

What do players think about a players representative group?

Almost all of the respondents (99.6%) are in favour of a player representative group while 97% feel every county should have a representative on this group. Figure 3 depicts player opinions on the potential work plan for a players group. Results (where 1=high priority) show that all areas are considered important for players. Generating minimum standards across all intercounty teams, emotional and well being support, enhanced media coverage, financial support and involvement in decision-making were rated marginally higher than education and career support.

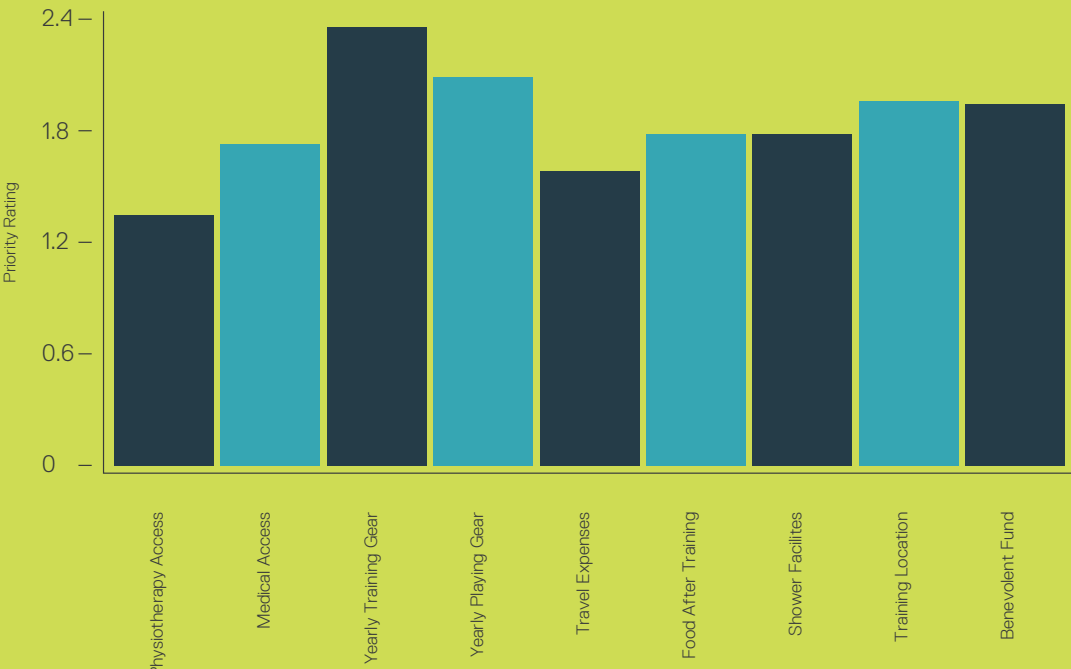
Figure 3: Priorities for Player Representative Group



In some personal accounts, a number of players remarked on the need for the involvement of players in decision making at regional and national level to overcome communication issues and to react to the dynamic nature of both sports. The costs associated with being an intercounty player primarily due to injuries and related rehabilitation was also alluded to.

Players were asked to indicate the importance of potential components of a set of minimum standards for intercounty players. Again, lower scores indicated a more important factor for players. Figure 4 shows that physiotherapy and medical access, expenses, shower facilities and food after training were highlighted as key components of minimum standards for players.

Figure 4: Priorities for Minimum Standards



In relation to the commitment of players to work collectively to fulfill the agenda and remit of a player representative group, the large majority of respondents were willing to promote their sport among young girls at club and county level, to take part in player led initiatives and in sponsorship schemes to enhance the profile and perception of their sport.

Table 5: Commitment of Players to Group Activities

	Very much so	A little	Not at all
Take responsibility for promotion of sport among girls	65.2%	34%	0.8%
Make yourself available for club and county promotion work for your sport	67.1%	30.4%	2.5%
Take part in player led initiatives to encourage respect, equality and an improved perception of your sport	69.2%	29.3%	1.6%
Group sponsorship schemes to enhance the profile of your sport	68.2%	29.5%	2.3%



Some Key Points.....

Data collected here from a large, cross section of intercounty players confirms previously anecdotal evidence that ladies footballers and camogie players playing at an elite level commit themselves at least daily to training for their sport. This preparation extends well beyond standard group training sessions with county and club teams incorporating individual gym, skills and injury management sessions as well as dietary modification and recovery work.

Many players experience physical, emotional and social challenges during their career, which impacts on their wellbeing. Players are under pressure, they are often overwhelmed and feel stressed due to the level of commitment and discipline required to be an intercounty player particularly when injured and during exam periods and challenging work circumstances.

Players invest and commit to their sport with their time but also financially. Quite a number of players are out of pocket quite likely due to travel commitments and injury recovery/management.

Despite the level of dedication apparent among intercounty players, many do experience a lack of recognition and acknowledgement among the general and sporting populations in Ireland.

Player responses suggest a disconnect between their playing commitments and associated health and wellbeing and current provisions for player welfare. Players are overwhelmingly supportive of a national player representative group who will advocate and provide for players in a playing, personal, and professional context, and are willing to work collectively to promote related player led initiatives and their sport.

What does this mean?

Intercounty ladies footballers and camogie players operating at an elite level are continuously adapting and improving their training and preparation to ensure that the standard of their sport and personal performance continues to grow. Inevitably, this presents many additional physical, emotional and social challenges for players that are currently not being sufficiently catered for at regional or national level. This presents an opportunity and a need for players to act. This survey shows that players are interested in changing things for camogie and ladies footballers in this player welfare context, they are willing to take responsibility for these issues that they share in relation to being an intercounty player. Mobilising a mass of educated, ambitious, committed female athletes is also an opportunity to show leadership for women in sport in Ireland, to work to increase the profile and credibility of ladies football and camogie, and to increase the enjoyment and attraction of being and becoming an intercounty player.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to all the players who took the time to respond to this survey. The information and experiences you shared will shape and guide the workings of the Women's Gaelic Players Association.



