

2008/2009 RCSI Rugby Captain **MIKE WILLIAMS** spoke to RCSI graduate and international rugby sensation Felipe Contepomi.



Mixing sport and medicine

Felipe Contepomi is one of the RCSI's best known alumni. He is both a medical doctor and has had a dramatically successful rugby career. He has captained his home country, Argentina, in international fixtures, has played in three World Cups, was nominated for International Rugby Player of the Year in 2007, was a fan favourite while playing for Leinster, and is now trying to make his mark for his new club in Toulon. In 2007 he graduated with a Bachelor's in Medicine from the RCSI and began his internship in Beaumont Hospital.

This interview was conducted in early October 2008.

On rugby

Why did you choose Leinster when you left Bristol – you had offers from a lot of clubs?

Playing with Leinster provided me with the opportunity to play with one of the best teams in Europe and to study at the College of Surgeons at the same time. If you have just one of those chances, you consider yourself lucky, and I had the opportunity to take both of them. It was an easy choice to make looking back, but at the time very little was known about how the Celtic League would progress, and in retrospect I consider myself very lucky.

How do you feel about playing against your former Leinster team mates when you take to the field for Argentina against Ireland?

I definitely don't enjoy playing against them, because I know how good they are. I would rather play with Brian O'Driscoll than against him. The same goes for Girvan Dempsey, Shaggy [Shane Horgan] or Rob [Kearney].

Surely you're at an advantage having an insight into their game and how they play?

Yes, but they know my game too. I know how good they are but it's a team sport, and I'm playing with 14 other people who don't play with them week in week out, so you still have to do your homework. And with the technology nowadays, you can see exactly what they do in different situations in the game.

How do you feel about putting in a big hit against one of your club mates?

The same way as if I play against Argentinian players when I am playing for Leinster. You give 100% for the team you are playing with, but especially so when you are playing for your country. But I think that whoever you play against, you should play with honesty and within the laws of the game; there should be no dirty play in that sense, so if a big hit is within the law, it's welcome and part of the game. You play hard but you look after your team mates whether you're playing for or against them, and that's how you earn their respect. I wouldn't be at all angry if I take a good hit, I would probably congratulate them. It's part of rugby and the sport you play.

You seem to have a great relationship with the Leinster fans. When you got your 100th Cap, the supporters made a presentation to you. That must have been a touching gesture considering you are so far from home.

It was really nice. Since I've been here with my family they always treat us very well. It's hard to come as a foreigner to a totally different culture, a totally different place, especially in Ireland, where players still play for their local club. Normally there are many more foreign players. Here, most of the Leinster players are from the Leinster area, which is great for the team but makes it very hard for a foreign player coming in.

You've played rugby now in three countries, two professionally, and captained your own national team, as well as playing alongside your brother. What would you say was your favourite moment in your rugby career?

It would have to be playing with my twin brother in three World Cups; that was unbelievable, especially the last one. In terms of where we come from in Argentina, it was a dream. I wonder if we will ever be able to do as well again. We may not have won the World Cup, but people can see that Argentina was a successful team. It is not always the result that dictates success, but how you reach it.

On medicine

How do you think the values you have learnt from playing top-level rugby will benefit you in your medical career?

It's not only rugby that gives you values. I'm a strong believer that playing a team sport teaches you different things, but you are also part of a team in your job as a doctor. So you are continuously working in a team, and whether you learn it in sport or in medicine it is no different. It is not something that you only learn from playing at a professional level: any team that you are involved in where you strive to be the best you can be, but at the same time understanding that you are doing something for the good of many other people, teaches you the same thing. You will see that every day of your life, where there is an error or something that is not done properly, some people have the attitude that someone else will fix it, rather than taking responsibility and making sure it is corrected, and most importantly that it doesn't happen again. And in sport it happens all the time. In rugby you don't lay blame, you make up for the mistake and try and turn it around. The trouble is that often in medicine an error is seen as weakness and not an opportunity to learn. But we are human and we will all make errors, and if you learn from them they will happen less and less. And I think that in everything we see errors as weakness, but particularly so in medicine. But you should recognise your mistakes and not make excuses for them.

Do you think you would've chosen orthopaedics if you didn't have a background in rugby?

Yes. I started my career thinking I was going to do that from the first minute. At home, when you qualify you go and do your residency, so you already know what you want to do when you finish college. But throughout my career I liked other disciplines as well; I like gastroenterology and general surgery as well, so at points that made me question my choice, but my intention has always been to stick with orthopaedics.

Having been so successful in your rugby career, do you feel you're putting extra pressure on yourself to be equally successful in medicine?

Pressure is for the man who has to get up at 4.00am to shift sacks of potatoes for 12 hours each day and still not make enough money to feed his wife and children, that's pressure. I don't feel pressure in that way. I think you build your own pressure. In my career I want to be successful as a doctor, but for me success is not about being the best, but instead about reaching your potential. I will try to be the best doctor I can be, and if I achieve that, then I can consider myself successful.

On working with Professor Hill

I understand that you're currently doing your internship under Professor Hill. How do you find working for him, having had him as a lecturer during your time at RCSI?

Well, as a Professor, you know, he can be strict. When he works with his colleagues he is very good, he will demand quality and he looks after his team, and on a one-to-one basis he gets the best out of you. If you are lazy he may put you on the spot, but that's no bad thing; although you may not enjoy it at the time, it's good for you in the long run.

On life

Did you have many problems with the language barrier when you first came over from Argentina?

I studied English at home in Argentina, and I went to an Irish school called Cardinal Newman College. I lived in Bristol for three years before I came here but I lived with three Argentinians, so that didn't really help as I spoke Spanish all day. But coming here and having a life outside of the training camp helped a lot, especially working and studying in the College where I had to speak English all day, every day. And although I may get confused for a French guy with my pronunciation, I don't see the language as a problem anymore.

How do you find juggling study with playing rugby and family life?

Well obviously it is not easy. It required an understanding position from the Club and from College, both of whom were unbelievable. And then of course there is the support from your family. I have always said that my family is the most important thing in my life. Probably, though, this last three to four years is the least time I've spent with them, but I presume they understand that it is what I have to do, and they are always very supportive. If things go well in rugby or College I would not take all the credit. Yes you have to do certain things on your own but it is not always a one-man effort, and without the support of your family you would never achieve as much.

Are you and Paula still enjoying Ireland?

The weather is hard to cope with. The city itself, Dublin, is not huge, but it's big enough to be active and lively. It's beautiful to come and visit, but it's the kind of city where you get more from living there than from visiting, I would think. Unlike London or Paris; they are beautiful to go and visit but to live there is pretty hectic.

Finally Felipe, now that you are qualified as a doctor, do you have any plans to retire from rugby like your brother?

The decisions are very personal: it is not an easy decision I can tell you. I've never thought about it really, but it is hard for people who have played rugby for a long time and they will tell you in particular how difficult it is. With Manuel, I tried to be more supportive of his decision rather than telling him what to do. It was important that whatever he decided, I made him feel like it was the right choice. I've always said when I stop enjoying rugby I will quit, if my body does not quit before that. Even being paid, you are putting your body on the line each training session, so no matter what you're getting paid, if you stop enjoying it then there's just no point.

Felipe is yet to play his first game, after suffering an ACL injury in the semi-final of the Heineken Cup against Munster. His partner Paula has just given birth to their second child and he is working in the Orthopaedic Department of the Clinique Saint-Roch under Dr Jose Gadea.