

# Sport - A Home For Lifelong Volunteering

## Volunteer Stories

### Sarah Heron

#### Ulster Rugby Volunteer

**Currently I am in my final year of university studying Leisure and Events Management. Personally, when growing up I was never really a sporty person. The only sport I ever played was hockey, however rugby was one sport I loved to watch, although I never imagined I would eventually play the sport, let alone become a coach.**

Before beginning my degree I wanted to be a nurse and had no interest in ever being involved in the sports industry. After being unsuccessful in getting on to a nursing course I decided to apply for something different. Even when starting my degree my focus was on the events side, but it wasn't long before this changed.

My first two years at university were turned upside down when I took ill, and it was after being sick that I wanted to regain a sense of normality through a social element as well as gaining some experience. This is something that rugby has given me.

I contacted several sporting organisations regarding voluntary opportunities, and it was after contacting Nicci from Ulster Rugby that my journey as a rugby volunteer began. Out of all the people and organisations I met with Nicci was the most helpful and highly motivated in getting me involved as a volunteer. It was only a matter of weeks before I was involved on match nights, something that really influenced my decision. Ulster see their volunteers as a key part of their organisation.

When first becoming a volunteer last March my sole aim was to get event experience and therefore I signed up to help with the half-time minis (mini rugby matches). Through this role I have met some incredible people and made some great friends. I also signed up for the GoldMark programme when I started. I feel GoldMark is a fantastic programme. It means you are getting something back from your volunteering as GoldMark is a recognised achievement when applying for jobs.

After volunteering on match nights I got a real bug for rugby and wanted to gain even more experience. As a result I began emailing several rugby clubs looking for volunteering opportunities. Lurgan Rugby Club was one of many clubs I emailed and it was after meeting with the volunteer co-ordinator at the club last April that I jumped onboard. The club has been extremely welcoming from day one and I soon began coaching the minis section of P1/2/3s.

Through coaching, and when speaking with one of the coaches who also sat on the club's committee, I was informed they were looking for a new PRO for the club. This is something I was extremely interested in as not only was it linked to my degree but I felt it would help with future employment in the industry. Everything moved quickly and last May I was voted into the position of PRO at the club's AGM, resulting in me also becoming a rugby committee member.



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This was only the start of my journey as a volunteer within rugby, however. Nicci was extremely good in sending through the various opportunities arising at Ulster Rugby outside of the match nights volunteering.

As a result I volunteered at the Ulster Rugby Easter camps and also at the Maxol Schools Festival held at the Kingspan, making my love of rugby grow even more, but at that stage I was still adamant that I would not be playing the game myself.

That all changed last summer when I began to play tag rugby with Lurgan and that really got me hooked on getting more involved in the sport. After being asked to help at the summer camps I decided that this would be a good opportunity to develop my coaching skills - and it allowed me to complete my 200 hours for the GoldMark Award.

It is nice to be recognised for your volunteering, and through the GoldMark you get recognised for your contribution.

That was still not the end of the journey. After speaking with Ulster Rugby staff at the camps they encouraged me to do my coaching badges and as a result I completed both my stage one and stage two over the summer.

After completing these the bug got even greater as I began to realise how much of a social element there was to the sport as well as the benefits it can have for your health. Another female coach at one of the camps talked me into going to Malone Rugby Club for their Give it a Try session. I was sceptical at the start as I didn't think I was cut out to be a rugby player, but I went along anyway. And it's safe to say that it wasn't long before I was hooked.

In the end I decided to go along to Queen's Rugby Club for their pre-season training after speaking with one of the coaches. The thing I loved most about Queen's was how welcoming the girls were, as well as the fact the club caters for all levels of ability. I never thought I would love playing the game as much as I do.

Rugby really is more than just a game. I love the sport and the game has taught me so many life skills, such as the importance of team. It is like a family. After playing the sport my confidence in my ability to coach rugby grew immensely and as a result I began to help coach the older age groups at Lurgan. I have recently become involved in the newly formed U16s team and the U14s girls' team. For me being able to coach allows me to give something back - and to be able to help new players develop in the game is something I find very rewarding.

Rugby truly has become a part of my life. I began this journey just looking for experience, but it has done a lot more for me than I could have imagined. By volunteering with Ulster Rugby and Lurgan Rugby Club I have seen my confidence develop and my mental health improve incredibly. As with rugby, both on and off the field I have become a stronger person and I feel this is because of the team element. Rugby is like a family, with everyone having each other's back and their best interests at heart.

For me the journey is not over. I have recently become a member of the Ulster Rugby Youth Forum, which aims to improve the game of rugby through the eyes of youth around Ulster. This has given me opportunities for cross-community work with Ulster GAA and the Irish FA and has allowed me to take up the position of PRO for the forum. Volunteering really does provide endless opportunities, for which I'll be forever grateful, and there is the possibility that I will sit on the IRFU Youth Council in Dublin.

For me the programme that Ulster provides opens several doors. Whether you are looking for experience, want to give back to the community or just for a social element, the opportunities are there. I am thankful that I took a step out of my comfort zone as in the space of a year I am doing things I never would have imagined. If someone had told me a year ago that in a year's time I would be playing and coaching rugby I would have laughed. Overall rugby has done a lot for me and I'm excited to see what the future holds as I continue to volunteer.



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