



Mixed Ability Rugby Case Studies



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Introduction

A crucial element of the Mixed Ability Model is to give voice to those underrepresented members of our communities who have directly benefiting from inclusion through sport. Real people, real stories, real role models, who can explain how it works, and why.

Through our numerous activities and research, we know Mixed Ability has clear potential for positive impacts from the individual through to the community level, but we believe participants' and beneficiaries' voices are the most apt to be listened to.

The inspirational stories collected in this booklet highlight the several positive impacts from involvement in Mixed Ability rugby. These work equally well for disabled and non-disabled participants, and span from physical and mental well-being, self-confidence and belonging (personal level), to shift to a more inclusive culture and increase in opportunities (community level), to broader shift in policies and perceptions, leading to a radical cultural change (societal level).

These stories will not only contribute to a growing body of good practice on the use of rugby as vehicle for social change, but inspire more participants with and without disabilities, coaches, clubs and National Governing Bodies to rethink their approach to inclusion and become fully representative of their local communities.

IMAS and the MIXAR team

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SECTION 1

WHAT IS MIXED ABILITY?

The Mixed Ability Model

The Mixed Ability model aims to promote social inclusion through sport, education and advocacy. The practical element, Mixed Ability sport, encourages social inclusion by integrating players regardless of dis/ability into a mainstream sport setting in their local community, playing non-adapted sports. Mixed Ability sport emphasises the importance of regular, frequent and sustainable provision, self-determination, club membership and opportunities for social interaction for all.

In this respect, it differs notably from other approaches that promote a separate and/or adapted approach to participation. The Mixed Ability model was first developed through rugby where it grew organically from a lack of provision for disabled people to play full-contact rugby. In rugby, the model has been shown to have positive impacts at the individual through to the community level ([Corazza and Dyer, 2017](#)).

The Mixed Ability model represents a radical approach to promoting meaningful inclusion and challenging the ablest culture of sport and broader society. The research[†] highlights that the Mixed Ability model has the potential for positive impacts (from the individual to community level) and that fundamental perception shifts around dis/ability can take place when disabled participants are fully integrated into mainstream sports clubs. For these positive impacts to be achieved, the educational component must be embedded alongside practical activities in order to ensure 'authentic' Mixed Ability provision and provide support/guidance to all involved.

Mixed Ability rugby: 15 a-side rugby union played abiding by World Rugby Laws for the game with a greater emphasis on rugby's core values and the inclusion of all participants. Players with and without disabilities play together on the same team.

[†] J. Dyer et al., MASDP Evaluation Report, 2019



IMAS

The Mixed Ability model is being developed and championed by the not-for-profit organisation, **International Mixed Ability Sports (IMAS)**. IMAS delivers practical Mixed Ability sports provision and training to organisations across the sports, disability, healthcare and education sectors around inclusion, diversity and the Mixed Ability model. It also works with national and international organisations across these sectors, such as with national governing bodies (NGBs), universities and national health services to inform policy and practice around sport and inclusion more broadly. IMAS trainers are all Mixed Ability participants, from a wide range of backgrounds and abilities, who share experiences and learning through interactive and accessible resources.

See the IMAS website for more information:
www.mixedabilitysports.org

What is MIXAR

MIX.A.R. (Mixed Ability Rugby for All) is an Erasmus+ Sport Collaborative partnership which aims to transfer, experiment and implement the Mixed Ability model in rugby across 5 European countries. Rugby is a sport that is becoming more and more popular, whose founding values such as teamwork, integrity, respect, solidarity and passion are in line with the vision of a fully inclusive society. The project brings together seven partners with different and complementary skills, experiences and competencies, which already incorporate a strong commitment to social inclusion in their work: the coordinator FIR, Federazione Italiana Rugby (IT), IMAS - International Mixed Ability Sports (UK), INICO - University of Salamanca, Instituto Universitario de Inclusión en la Comunidad (ES), Sunday's Well Rebels Rugby Football Club (IRL), Per Formare srl (IT), RV - Rugby Vlaanderen (B), FER Federación Española Rugby (ES).



MIXED ABILITY manifesto



Sport has the power to transform lives making us healthier and happier, and yet there are people excluded or segregated because of stigma, prejudice or personal perceptions of their capability.



Mixed Ability is a social movement within sports, actively promoting inclusion and equality through a sense of belonging and membership to a group, team or club.



Too often sport is seen as the prerogative of elite athletes or established majorities. Grassroots sport can also be responsible for excluding minorities allowing access only to charitable or segregated activities.



Mixed Ability Sports follows the same rules and regulations of mainstream sports without adaptations, and only minor adjustments to take into account individual participant needs.



Mixed Ability recognises the right of everyone to participate in community sports without being separated, classified or labelled.



In breaking down these barriers Mixed Ability Sport creates opportunities for marginalised communities to challenge the established status quo and affirm their right to equal participation.



SECTION 2

PERSONAL IMPACT

Being involved in sport helps me by increasing my general happiness whilst also giving me the opportunity to make new friends. I'm happy whilst I'm playing and find it has built up my confidence. Tom Wilson

FROM FRONT ROW SEAT TO FRONT ROW FORWARD – TOM'S STORY (DERBY RFC – ENGLAND, UK)

As a profoundly deaf player with cerebral palsy Tom may have felt that contact rugby wasn't going to be a possibility. However, it is just 3 months since his first training session, and he has already represented Derby RFC in a full contact match and visited Sixways Stadium with the rest of the Derby Bucks MA team. Derby RFC head coach, Mike Hawkes, sat down with Tom to find out more about how Mixed Ability has given him the opportunity to participate in the sport he loves.

So, Tom, how and why did you start playing MA Rugby?

I'm very passionate about rugby and have been attending Derby RFC to support the 1st XV for a number of years. Because of this I wanted the club to start a Mixed Ability team, so I could actually participate. Following a presentation from IMAS (International Mixed Ability Sports) the sessions started in October 2018, I've already played in a fixture in Worcester and had my first full contact fixture on the 8th December in Northampton.

What is it that you most enjoy about the team?

I like being healthy and enjoy running. I'm excited about the prospect of the new Derby Mixed Ability team as I enjoy throwing the ball and getting involved in the contact elements like scrummaging and tackling. I enjoy the higher level of MA Rugby as it pushes me to be better.

How does being a member of Derby Bucks MA team help in your everyday life?

Being involved in sport helps me by increasing my general happiness whilst also giving me the opportunity to make new friends. I'm happy whilst I'm playing and find it has built up my confidence. Afterwards I feel tired!

How important is it that your friends and family get involved?

It's great to have the support of my family, my brother Adam attends a lot of the sessions and helps the coach out. I also remember that dad used to enjoy rugby before he passed away so it's nice to have that connection. My staff help a lot by providing travel to the sessions, support during the session and interpreting some of the coaches' instructions.

What would you say to other people who might be thinking about joining an MA team?

They should get involved, it's a great way to make friends, have a laugh and is generally a happy place!

DEVELOPING CONFIDENCE AND SELF-ESTEEM THROUGH MIXED ABILITY RUGBY – GABRIELE'S STORY (CHIVASSO RUGBY – ITALY)

Gabriele left school at 16 due to serious behavioural problems and lack of motivation. He has a diagnosis of epilepsy and learning difficulties and, with his family, he was looking for opportunities to return to sport after a phase of forced inactivity. They came across Mixed Ability at Chivasso and Gabriele decided to participate in 2014, at the age of 17.

It was a great time to join as Enrico Colzani, the head coach, was building a senior team for the inaugural Mixed Ability rugby world cup to be held in Bradford, UK.

For the first training session, Gabriele was accompanied to the ground by his family. His mother says Gabriele struggled in the school environment, leading him to develop low self-esteem, frustration, and aggressive behaviours. This affected family dynamics and everyday life.

During the first few months, Gabriele became more and more involved and motivated, regularly attending training and developing positive relationships within the team. He takes rugby very seriously. He studies the Laws of the Game, and often explains them to other teammates. Everyone supports Gabriele's changes, he shows distress less and less often although still struggles to bond with his peers, preferring the safe home environment and the relationship with his mum and older brother.

After 7 months of training, he was offered the opportunity to join the Bradford Bumble's tour to France. On that occasion, despite the language barriers, Gabriele was welcomed as a full member of the English team, and a valued one thanks to his rugby skills and the many tries scored. This had an incredibly positive impact on his self-esteem and confidence, and for the first time Gabriele experienced a sense of belonging and recognised his contribution to a team.

In August 2015 Gabriele was part of the Chivasso team who reaches the semi-final of the first Mixed Ability world cup in Bradford, but Gabriele didn't play well. He suffered with the idea of 'playing against his English brothers', who accepted him as one of them in France. He also clashed with some of his Italian teammates, as he said they were pressurising him to perform, and his behaviour immediately returned to being confrontational.

When they returned to Italy, the head coach and team decided to work on communication and mutual understanding, as well as broadening the opportunities for Gabriele beyond the pitch. Gabriele achieved a qualification to use the defibrillator, becoming responsible for safety on the field and, at the end of 2016, through a teammate, he was



offered a job. What was meant to be a fixed term contract, soon becomes a permanent one, opening new opportunities not just for Gabriele, but the whole family. At this point his older brother starts playing with him, reshaping the family dynamics, shifting from competition and frustration to respect and mutual support.

His mother acknowledges that rugby has played a crucial role in this evolution. From the moment he felt important, valued and accepted, Gabriele started to acquire more confidence, in himself and his abilities. Especially being part of a group and the sense of belonging that brings, was highly formative because after the negative school experience he too often felt rejected.

A further step in the direction of independence came during the MIXAR project, where Gabriele took part in the trip to Flanders Open Rugby without a member of his family for the first time, experiencing the dimension of separation at 21. During the outward journey he had a series of seizures, but these were managed by the team. During the crisis, Gabriele recognised the coach and was reassured by his presence, aware that there were people ready to assist him. The day after the seizure Gabriele played against other Mixed Ability sides, giving his best as a rugby player and – moreover – as an independent adult.



COACHING MIXED ABILITY – MAEVE D'ARCY, HEAD COACH OF SUNDAYS WELL REBELS (IRELAND)

The first time I heard about Mixed Ability rugby was in January 2014. I was living and working in Nenagh, County Tipperary and heavily involved in rugby. I was playing with my team, UL Bohemian RFC Ladies as well as representing the Munster Ladies. I had also begun coaching an U11 boys team in my local club Nenagh Ormond RFC. My brother Garrett D'Arcy had been living in Cork for over 20 years and had played, coached, managed and served on the Committee in his rugby club, Sundays Well RFC. He rang me one night in a mood that can only be described as 'like a child at Christmas time' to tell me "you have to come down to Cork and see this".

Sundays Well Rebels, the first Mixed Ability rugby team in Ireland started training in January 2014 and from the first night, my brother was hooked. I drove down after work one Friday evening at the end of January to see what all the fuss was about and I caught the bug straight away too. I have always loved the sport of rugby. Some of the most memorable experiences of my life have been through rugby and the best friends I have met in life have come through the sport. To me it is a game that's for everyone, all shapes and sizes, from all walks of life... or so I thought. Mixed Ability rugby takes that concept to a whole new level. It's rugby in its purest form and opens the sport up to many new and different members of our community that have not been involved before.

I spent the next four years coaching the Rebels team, experiencing our first World Cup IMART 2015 in Bradford, the second IMART 2017 in Spain along with many tours and matches in between. I was passionately telling anyone who would listen, especially those in rugby circles all about it. I cannot see a downside to Mixed



Ability rugby or Mixed Ability sports – everyone involved just seems to get so much enjoyment from it. Most people's reactions were positive, interested and encouraging but after four years, we were still the only Mixed Ability rugby team here in Ireland.

Enter MIXAR... The Sundays Well Rebels were invited to be a partner in the MIXAR project. This was an opportunity to be a part of a project group involving Unions, Federations and Organisations from around Europe in an effort to streamline, grow and develop Mixed Ability rugby as championed by IMAS. I am 100% convinced that Mixed Ability rugby is great for players with and without disabilities, coaches, clubs, unions, federations and the entire sport. But how can you convince people to take a chance on it – I was just a coach of one team, in one club. Since being involved with the Rebels, I have felt that Mixed Ability was something much bigger than just a rugby team and I felt a duty and need to spread the word and grow it wider than just us.

The MIXAR project gave me the chance to be involved at the foundations of a new sport and sporting movement, which is a very rare thing. To sit around a table with people who are at the top of their organisations and governing bodies in discussions about Mixed Ability rugby was intimidating at the start to say the least, but from the first MIXAR project meeting in Salamanca, Spain in February 2018, the enthusiasm was evident and the goal was a common one – to grow the Mixed Ability Movement.

I felt a heavy burden of responsibility as part of the project to represent the players and coaches at grassroots level. We, the ordinary people don't often get the chance to mingle with the powers that be in governing bodies. I wasn't going to miss this opportunity to give input from the bottom up so that the outcomes of the project would be practical and useful for players, coaches and clubs in local communities. I needn't have worried at all (and could have left the boxing gloves at home...), everyone involved was just like me, a rugby enthusiast that was already convinced about the Mixed Ability concept! We all wanted to see it grow and develop throughout the course of the project and beyond.

The developments across Europe since the beginning of the MIXAR project have been amazing. The development in Ireland, the UK, Spain and Italy has seen Mixed Ability rugby take its place among community and grassroots teams. The development in Belgium has been even more significant. Rugby Vlaanderen are one of the project partners and had no Mixed Ability rugby in Belgium at the start of the project. Through their work with the MIXAR project, open days were run by the union and new teams have since started up.

Mixed Ability rugby takes that concept to a whole new level. It's rugby in its purest form and opens the sport up to many new and different members of our community that have not been involved before. Maeve D'Arcy

Flanders Open Rugby, one of the world's largest mainstream rugby 10 a side tournaments, will go down in history for their 2019 edition. This was the first mainstream rugby tournament to host a Mixed Ability rugby category alongside the men's, women's and veteran's competitions. The reactions and response from the rugby community from all over the world at the tournament was unimaginable.

While the sport of rugby has always been important to me, Mixed Ability rugby has changed my life. The opportunity to be involved in the MIXAR project has magnified that change and it is something that I feel very proud of and grateful for.



SECTION 3

COMMUNITY IMPACT

MIXED ABILITY FEATURES A MAINSTREAM EVENT – OPEN FLANDERS 2019

**Hey, ever played inclusive
rugby in Belgium?**

**Is there a tournament
where we can try to inject
Mixed Ability rugby?**

**You mean the biggest 10's
tournament in the world, with
over 2000 rugby players from
18 countries and in the country
known for its beer?**

Splendid! Let's do that!

No.

**How about the
Flanders Open Rugby
at Dendermonde?**

Yes!

If the meeting at the headquarters of Rugby Vlaanderen really went like this, will remain a guess. Fact is that the Flemish Union did step up to this challenging vision of making Mixed Ability rugby mainstream and showed what can be achieved if a group of people wants to play contact rugby, regardless of other people's perceptions.



Since there were no active Mixed Ability rugby teams in Belgium at that time, the first step was to mobilise players and coaches. This was done through a series of ‘teasers’ where – after some practical workshops – a little match followed. Seeing Mixed Ability rugby players march up to the pitch for the first time always makes the spectators frown. “Are they really going to play contact rugby?”. Usually this perspective is followed by the expression of joy and pure happiness on the faces of the players after the game. And thus, the quest for a tribe of noble Barbarians from Flanders began.

Across the country they rode, arriving in dark and obscure clubhouses who were dwelling in an atmosphere of beer and French fries to... No. This is again a poet’s account. In fact, the champions went to different clubs, letting people discover how refreshing and pure the emotions on the pitch can be.

As the team grew working towards the Flanders Open Rugby, the foreign teams were also building up and letting us know through the union connections that they were looking forward to the trip and the sportive encounter in Flanders fields.

The tournament itself cannot be described since what happens on tour stays on tour! If you’re curious, check the video opposite, as at 2:00 it shows the final played on the Sunday!

From the point of view of a Union, we were glad to see how the crowd was carried away by the action on the pitch. There was cheering, applause, “oeh’s and aah’s” when there was a nice action. In short, the spectators were enjoying rugby.

After the tournament, players kept in contact and within 2 months, 2 new clubs started a Mixed Ability team. Other clubs asked to have an introduction and are looking to build up the conditions needed to start a Mixed Ability rugby team.

So back to the beginning: was it a bold move to hit such a big tournament as our first target? Yes. Isn’t the first step challenging for a player who enters a new club, or the first time he gets on the pitch? Yes. All you need is a bit of audacity to start what it is ‘just another rugby team!’.



ARITZ AND JOSE MANUEL GURRUTXAGA – GAZTEDI RUGBY TALDEA, BASQUE COUNTRY, SPAIN

In 2013, a training session was organised between Down Araba's leisure programme and some members of Gaztedi Rugby team. As a parents, we observed and felt that everyone had a very good time.

As a result of this experience, from the club we were offered the possibility to create a Mixed Ability rugby team made up of people with and without disabilities.

At first, the idea seemed a little crazy given the vision that perhaps out of ignorance we had of this sport, but after a meeting in which David Izquierdo explained the idea they had, we felt encouraged to give it a go, and the truth is that it has been one of the greatest successes of our lives.

At first it seemed to us that this could be very complicated for our son. We soon realised that the good work, commitment and involvement of the people who led the MA team, promoted exponentially the inclusion of all people in the dynamics. In addition the activity is not only sporty, there are also social and educational moments such as the famous 'third half' (post match get together).

When they started playing games against other teams, more people were still cheering. The motivation was high on receiving the invitation to play the first Mixed Ability Rugby World Cup to be held in August 2015 in England in the city of Bradford.

All that involved in preparing such an event for them was something amazing, but nothing comparable to the experience we lived there. We are a family of four, José Manuel and Pilar, our daughter Olaia and our son with Down Syndrome, Aritz. In Bradford, unfortunately, only Aritz and José Manuel were able to attend,



and what happened there was something wonderful, unique and exceptional.

The great atmosphere that was generated among the participants of all the teams, the organisation and the public, but above all the level of inclusion that we had there with our sons and daughters made, at least in my case, every night in my room I would burst into tears as I relived what had happened throughout the day.

Everything was unbeatable, ignoring the fact that my wife and daughter for work reasons missed this great experience, so I had the job of telling them everything I lived, which wasn't an easy job because they were a lot of emotions difficult to translate into words.

When my son and I got home, I hugged my wife and daughter and broke down to cry in such a way that they thought something bad had happened to me. I immediately told them no, that what had happened to us was a great thing and that I cried with emotion and grief because they hadn't lived it. Following my recount, my daughter was encouraged to play with the women's team, and I was encouraged to play with the veterans team. Of course, we also started playing with the Mixed Ability team.

In June 2016 Aritz along with four other teammates went to Turin for a match against Chivasso. This meant for us another indescribable moment because for the first time he went there alone, without family and accompanied with his teammates, with his friends.

After the Bradford World Cup in Bradford, I was sure that what I had lived there would be very difficult to repeat, but I was wrong! In August 2017, Vitoria Gasteiz, our city, hosted the second IMART 2017, in which I was immensely lucky to participate as a player with my son. It was brilliantly exciting for the whole family. The most incredible thing came when Aritz got a try while I was just 10 meters away from the play. I was able to hug him right there under the excited gaze of his mother and sister. That day was coincidentally my birthday and it really was the best gift of my life.

All this experience of the World of Mixed Ability has provided for our family an area of enjoyment for all since we live it above all as something wonderful for Aritz seeing him how comfortable he is in that environment.

As far as Aritz is concerned, since he is in the team, we feel that something is changed in him. I have a feeling that we had never seen the real

him before, and sincerely we believe that this is due to rugby, and to everything that comes with this of values and the immense work of the people who work with him always from affection, respect and inclusion. Rugby has become 'his thing', he always waits for training and match days to be with his teammates, no matter how long he has been and waiting to enjoy the third half as well.

We can say that the Mixed Ability is for this family a gift that has come to us from wonderful people who use part of their time to make other people happy. A thousand thanks to everyone!





SECTION 4

SOCIETAL IMPACT



A UNION'S JOURNEY – THE IRISH RUGBY FOOTBALL UNION (IRFU)

The Erasmus+ Sport project Mixed Ability Rugby for All (MIXAR) has greatly impacted Mixed Ability rugby in Ireland. In 2014 Sunday's Well Rugby Football Club formed a Mixed Ability team aptly named the "Rebels", they were the first and only Mixed Ability team in the country.

Mixed Ability rugby was a new concept to Irish sport and at that point did not fall under the umbrella of the national governing body for rugby the Irish Rugby Football Union (IRFU). At the time the focus of the IRFU for development of an inclusive game for people with intellectual disabilities was centred on an adapted tag rugby program. The adapted tag is a modified tag rugby game played by people with disabilities and learning difficulties. It is a volunteer lead initiative supported by the IRFU Spirit of Rugby program. It has achieved successes in its own right by given people and clubs the safe structured game to provide to people with disabilities.

The Rebels continued to champion Mixed Ability rugby as an inclusive form of the game for people with and without disabilities. They became World champions by winning the 2015 inaugural International Mixed Ability Rugby Tournament (IMART) in Bradford, England, in August 2015 and followed this up by narrowly losing out in the 2017 IMART final in Victoria Gasteiz, Spain. Mixed ability rugby continued to grow in popularity within Sunday's Well RFC with many following with interest across social media on the team's progress. Clubs started to make contact with the Rebels expressing an

With Mixed Ability rugby and Mixed Ability sports sometimes the best way of explaining the concept is by seeing it or experiencing it.

interest in the Mixed Ability game. The clubs that expressed interests had an adapted tag offering and were looking for progression for their players and or become more inclusive with the rest of the members in their clubs.

Sundays Well Rebels were invited by IMAS to be a partner in the European Erasmus+ project, MIXAR. This was part of catalyst to changing the future of Mixed Ability rugby in Ireland. The MIXAR project gave the Rebels the opportunity to invite coaches from DLSP (Barry Hicks) and Malone (Sam McBurney) to join them in Bradford in April 2018 for the second transnational meeting which focused on coaching Mixed Ability rugby, hosted by IMAS, the international organisation promoting Mixed Ability worldwide. The two coaches got to experience Mixed Ability Rugby for the first time with a training session and match played in Halifax RFC over the weekend.

The response was amazing and both coaches left Bradford knowing they could do this in their clubs too.

The effect and influence of the MIXAR project here in Ireland has been profound. It has increased awareness on a national scale and also rapidly progressed the movement of Mixed Ability rugby here.
Sundays Well Rebels

With the awarding of IMART 2020 to Cork, the Rebels set those two interested clubs a challenge to get started, with a goal to have a team participate in the World Cup in Cork in 2020.

As the MIXAR project continued, the Rebels created links with representatives from other national governing bodies, FIR, FER, Rugby Flanders, as well as IMAS. These governing bodies committed to raising awareness of Mixed Ability rugby at a union and federation level. DLSP and Malone were also in contact with the IRFU about starting Mixed Ability Rugby teams in Ireland so the movement was finally starting to grow out side of the Rebels.

This increased awareness of Mixed Ability rugby at a national level in Ireland and led to the IRFU meeting with two teams in August 2018, Sundays Well Rebels who were up and running for over 4 years at the time and Malone Tornadoes who were ready to start a Mixed Ability team for the 2018 / 2019 season. The IRFU backed a pilot project for the 2018 / 2019 season with the two teams, along with support for a

third team, the DLSP Eagles to begin after Christmas.

A delegation from the IRFU Spirit of Rugby Program joined the MIXAR project meeting in Cork for the third transnational meeting in Cork in November 2018. Anne Marie Hughes head of the Spirit of Rugby program presented the Union's plans to grow Mixed Ability rugby in Ireland which was well received. The hosting of the transnational event in Munster rugby's Irish Independent Park drew a large audience nationally as well as delegates from the project partners. The meeting in Cork allowed for the second instalment of the coach's practical sessions and gave us an update on how things were developing in the new teams.

An IRFU review of the pilot project at the end of the 2018 / 2019 season was very positive with all three teams, Sundays Well Rebels, Malone Tornadoes and DLSP Eagles growing throughout the season. New teams had also expressed an interest in starting up. Bantry Bay RFC in West Cork began training with their Mixed Ability team in September 2019 and the first Women's Mixed Ability team in Ireland began training in October 2019 in Ballincollig RFC, also in Co. Cork.

The effect and influence of the MIXAR project in Ireland has been profound. It has increased awareness on a national scale and also rapidly progressed the movement of Mixed Ability rugby here. And there is no sign of it slowing down as the MIXAR project is coming to an end... The IRFU are supporting the upcoming Mixed Ability Rugby World Cup, IMART 2020, which will be held in Sundays Well RFC in June 2020. The word continues to spread, and the Mixed Ability experience is now available in five rugby clubs in Ireland, with more clubs sure to follow!

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For help setting up your own Mixed Ability Rugby team or to find out more,
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