

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY: **MR DONAL LENIHAN**, former Irish player and captain, former British & Irish Lions manager, on 7 September 2012, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Arts, *honoris causa*, on **RONAN O'GARA**

A Sheansailéir agus a mhuintir uilig na hOllscoile,

The achievements that define the career of Ronan O'Gara to date, and I specify to date as this guy has no intention of disappearing into the sunset any time soon, are quite simply phenomenal. With 124 appearances, he is the most capped player in Irish rugby history and second in the all-time list behind Australian scrum half George Gregan. Ireland's record points scorer with 1075 international points, O'Gara has amassed an additional 2409 for Munster, including a tournament record of 1298 in the Heineken Cup. He holds the record for the most caps in the Five/Six Nations international championship with 61 and his 98 Heineken Cup appearances is also a record for that tournament.

Impressive though they are, those statistics tell only part of the story behind the iconic rugby figure that I am privileged to introduce to you here this morning. To survive in the cut and thrust of professional sport at international level for over twelve years requires special qualities, characteristics that Ronan O'Gara has in abundance.

Having watched him grow and progress under the tutelage of his long time mentor Declan Kidney while attending school at PBC in Cork, Ronan continued his rapid development in adult rugby with UCC and Cork Constitution and made such progress that the international selectors came calling. Trouble was those initial calls came, not from Ireland, but from the USA for whom Ronan was eligible having been born in San Diego, California where his father Fergal was professor of microbiology.

The allure of playing in the 1999 Rugby World Cup was one that America were prepared to offer at a time when Ronan was behind the more experienced and established figures of David Humphreys and Eric Elwood in the Irish pecking order. Thankfully, he resisted the call and had sufficient belief and confidence in his own ability to stay and fight for a place in the Irish set-up.

What makes Ronan's achievements even more spectacular, in my view, is that he has functioned exclusively in the most demanding position on the rugby field during a period when the game has advanced and developed at a rate that was unthinkable in the not-so-distant amateur era. While rugby is the ultimate in team sports, there is no doubt

that the person with the No 10 jersey on his back carries more responsibility into battle than any other. O’Gara is one of those special individuals who thrives on that responsibility and grows in stature when the pressure is at its most intense.

His career is pockmarked with crucial scores when the need is greatest. His winning drop goal to secure Ireland's first Grand Slam in 61 years in Cardiff in 2009 is already the stuff of legend. When Mirco Bergamasco missed a touch line conversion of a famous try in Rome in 2011 as Italy strove for a first ever win over Ireland in the Six Nations championship to leave them clinging to a precarious one point lead with under four minutes left on the clock, I swore I saw a smile on O’Gara's face as he stood behind the posts. Where others saw impending disaster, O’Gara recognised opportunity. Two minutes later, he rescued Ireland from the jaws of a demoralising defeat with yet another crucial drop goal. Add in two more against Northampton and Castres in the opening rounds of last season’s Heineken Cup and you begin to get the picture! That is what separates Ronan O’Gara from the rest. With him, where there's a will, there's always a way. If his team is willing, then he will find that way.

Operating in the out-half role requires a special skill set, including the ability to function under pressure in the heat of battle. It requires leadership skills and an appreciation of the diverse needs and requirements of all your teammates, with the likes of Paul O’Connell monitoring every decision. Now that is not for the meek or faint hearted!

As if dealing with the famous O’Connell scowl on the back of a poor option isn't bad enough, O’Gara has also has to deal with a succession of 18 stone forwards, heading straight down his channel, constantly trying to bury him every time they are in possession. He knows they are coming and he knows he has to stand and face the juggernaut. While he has been barrellled on more than one occasion, his bravery is never called into question. It is one of the many attributes that endear him to those he plays with.

The thing I admire most about Ronan O’Gara is not the extraordinary points-scoring feats that have characterised his play for so long but his resilience and mental toughness. If Brian O’Driscoll rates as the most outstanding rugby player this country has ever produced, Ronan O’Gara is undoubtedly the most resilient. For all the highs he has experienced over the years, and there have been many, his career has also navigated some choppy seas. His temperament was tested at a young age when a late penalty kick that could have secured a first ever Heineken Cup for Munster in their first

final appearance back in 2000, drifted agonisingly wide. He vowed at that moment to get a specialist kicking coach and to perfect the art, which he did.

The 2007 World Cup was a big disappointment for both Ireland and O’Gara but yet again the Cork man came back stronger from the experience and within nine months had inspired Munster to a second Heineken Cup triumph over the might of Toulouse. Lions tours have also had their share of heartbreak but each and every time he has absorbed the lessons and moved on.

If the beginning of his international career was characterised by a frantic head-to-head with David Humphreys which went a long way towards building his mental fortitude, his duel with Jonny Sexton in recent years will not only stand to the Leinster man long after O’Gara has departed the scene, but has also highlighted his dogged determination to show what he is still capable of at the highest level of the game well into his mid-thirties. He does not give up easily.

Two years ago, I was invited by the powers-that-be in European rugby to be part of a select group that would not only pick the best Heineken Cup side of all time, but also to select the tournament’s most influential player to that point. With such luminaries on that panel along with me as Lions guru Sir Ian McGeechan, England World Cup winner Lawrence Dallaglio, legendary Australian out-half Michael Lynagh, former English out-half and Sky pundit Stuart Branes, former French captain Fabien Galthie and the great Welsh Lion Ieuan Evans, I was interested to see if my clearly unbiased view that Ronan O’Gara should be the front-runner for that prestigious honour would be shared by those from further afield. In the end, I had no argument to make. O’Gara was the standout figure, universally acclaimed by the vast majority of my learned colleagues for the manner with which he had kept Munster to the forefront of the European game for over well over a decade.

If his international record is astonishing, it is the role he played in the transformation of Munster rugby from also-rans in Europe in the early days, to double champions and the team that everyone sought to emulate and model their side around that in time will be his enduring legacy. What O’Gara has done for rugby in Munster is extraordinary.

Outside of the game, Ronan gives generously of his time to a number of charities. He is adored by the thousands of young kids who support and follow Munster rugby these days and is always on hand to sign an autograph, shake a hand, pose for a picture or help a person in need. He has never forgotten where he comes from and I can assure

you, it is not San Diego. A proud Irish man, a staunch Munster man, Ronan is first and foremost a Cork man. That is why being awarded this honorary doctorate by his hometown university from where he graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree and a Masters in Business Economics makes this award even more special.

Today, UCC are honouring some truly remarkable Irish sports people from a variety of sports whose contribution and achievements in soccer, camogie and ladies football, horse racing and hurling mark them out as standout performers.

As a former rugby player, I am not only thrilled that my sport is recognised as part of UCC's 100 year celebration of sport but that Ronan O'Gara's remarkable career is acknowledged and honoured here. I cannot think of a more worthy recipient and I congratulate him for all he has done for the game in this country.