



Garioch RFC

Playing Pathway for All

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Mums & Scrums

Throughout society, there has long persisted the myth that motherhood and sport are incompatible.

Whilst it cannot be denied that it's a tough gig, an increasing number of women are proving that motherhood and sport can go hand-in-hand.

For one rugby team in Scotland, a group of four women are sharing their experiences of motherhood and rugby to celebrate International Women's Day.

This year's IWD theme is embracing equity.

Equity recognises that each person has different circumstances, and allocates the exact resources and opportunities needed to reach an equal outcome.

Sammy Ross, Sam Sutherland, Jess Silcocks and Chloe Matthews discuss how Garioch RFC and their partners have embraced equity, supporting them to continue and thrive in the rugby community.

Parent over player

Playing at the highest level in Scotland was a dream for Jess, and after captaining Garioch to Premiership promotion last season, the 31-year-old was ready to pursue another dream. Motherhood.

"I'd been ready for a few years to have kids, but I didn't want to hang up my boots", said Jess, whilst feeding 12-week-old Lucy.

"I found it very, very tough. But there came a point where I just thought if I want to do this, I need to set a date, set a season and said that was it. We were obviously then very lucky we got pregnant straight away.

"Making that decision though was incredibly hard. You have to pluck up the courage to stop playing, and it's obviously amazing to have a child, but for me that choice and decision to give up rugby which is such a huge part of who you are, so you can have a baby, it's hard."

For 26-year-old Chloe, she found that stepping back from rugby when she was pregnant with Sandy was hard on her social life.

"Socially, before having Sandy, rugby was everything. It was tough going down to training and not being able to be as involved with drills, and then stepping out of playing was hard too. It's like you're in the team but you're not. The girls were great at staying in touch and keeping me in the loop though.

"What I missed most was everything that comes with a game-day. Even just running on water or the kicking tee, having a drink, you can't exactly do that.

"But of course, it is totally worth it", she adds, as she bounces six-month-old Sandy on one knee.



Three of the Garioch mum's with their children and the Calcutta Cup at a club community event in summer 2022.

Returning to play

With mental and physical changes, and childcare to consider, there are many challenges when it comes to returning to rugby after pregnancy.

Sammy, mother of one year-old Harper, was taken to Aberdeen Royal Infirmary for an emergency c-section and this had left the utility back concerned about how her body would hold up in contact.

She returned to training in the summer of 2022, just three months after having her daughter, and began playing just shy of seven weeks later.

"I'd been back to training for a while, but in terms of going back to play a game I just decided to go for it. My only concern was 'is my stomach going to split open and will all my guts fall out?' of course it was fine, but you always think the worst", said Sammy.

"I went back last summer during Sevens season, which I thought 'it'll be fine, it's only seven minute games so that's easy' but I was so wrong. I wasn't half as fit as I thought I was."

There was an added challenge in Sammy's return to rugby as the team stepping up to play in the Premiership League.

"Going into Premiership level was hard. Playing against new teams who were so much fitter and faster than you, even before pregnancy.

"But having seen Sam come back to rugby after she'd had three kids and come back even better than she had been before, it gave me that motivation knowing I could do it too."

After a successful return to the fold, Sammy (30) will now captain Garioch in the Sarah Beaney Cup.

Sammy's team-mate, Sam has already made a comeback to rugby once, after giving birth to twins, Alistair and Hamish five years ago, followed by Merida a year later.

Now with 13-week-old Finlay in her arms, Sam is on her next return to rugby journey as she gets back to training and playing, having started in the second-row last weekend against Watsonians.



Sam (left) with her four children after playing against Watsonians in her first game back after having Merida, three of the second-generation Garioch children, Sammy (right) with Harper after a game.

Rugby as self-care

Sam's first return to rugby was initially overshadowed by feelings of guilt.

"I think the mum-guilt is a big thing too. Regardless of when you go back to playing, it's that worry of 'might they begrudge me for going back and doing something for myself?'. You also worry about injuries and how that might impact you as a mother", said Sam, who plays second-row.

"But I think at least for me the more children I've had, I realised that taking the time for myself to do something I enjoy, which is rugby, is better for them.

"Rugby makes me happier, which makes my kids happier and it makes me a better mum. Rugby is my adult time, it's my self-care.

"I have such a supportive partner, and I'm glad that he recognises and understands the importance of rugby to me as an individual and as a mum."

Sammy also has a similar experience.

"I'm the same as Sam, I view rugby as my time away. But sometimes I do feel guilty because I work full time, I train and I play games at the weekend. My partner, Bobby, also plays rugby so I've not only got my games, but we will also watch his.

"I have to remember how good rugby is for my mental health, and that's only going to be good for Harper because it means she'll get the best of me, whereas if I didn't have rugby I think I could easily get into a downwards spiral. I'm lucky that Bobby understands this, and makes sure I have the time to continue with my rugby."

Clubhouse improvements

Jess, who was a Royal Bank RugbyForce Young Ambassador last season, has continued to represent the women's team at Garioch's committee throughout her pregnancy and subsequent birth.

She found her journey with pregnancy along with seeing her team-mates enter motherhood, opened her eyes to some of the unintentional barriers women were facing at the club.

“The club is such a welcoming, family-orientated place but there’s been wee things I’ve been able to change and make things a bit easier for us mum’s. But prior to getting pregnant I didn’t realise these things were missing.”

With backing from the committee, the club now has highchairs, better changing facilities including hooks on the back of the doors for hanging up the all-important baby bag, and they even have baby bouncers in the gym, meaning the players can complete weight training whilst their child is safely entertained.

“We’re really lucky that Peter and Gareth (committee members) understand how important inclusion is, and I think they also knew how important rugby is for me, so staying involved in the committee when I was pregnant and being able to make change was huge for me.

“Just 10-years-ago none of this would have been possible, it’s been a quick change in a short time but it’s now exactly how it should be”, she added.



Jess with Lucy in her pram getting ready for a strength and conditioning session in the Garioch gym.

Role models for the next generation

One of the key motivators for the Garioch mum’s and their return to rugby is being a role model to their children.

“I always make a point of having Harper around rugby”, said Sammy.

“I know she’s too young to really understand it, but I want her to grow up seeing me and other women smashing it. When we have women like Nikki (Simpson) and Lindsay (McDiarmid) do so well (playing for The Thistles), I want her to see that and be inspired by the strong, powerful women around her.

“We have people from all sorts of backgrounds in our team and around the club, and Harper will keep learning from being immersed in that, it will only better her. And it’s just like the motto, ‘you can’t be what you can’t see’.”

Chloe added: “Both myself and my partner play, but I’m definitely motivated to continue because of Sandy. I want him to know it’s not just a boys’ sport. Rugby is a sport for everyone, and I want to make sure he grows up seeing there are no barriers to it.”

For Sam on the other hand, her children’s exposure to rugby has only been through her and the Garioch women’s team: “Because the twins are just at that age where they can start the minis, I asked if they wanted to start rugby. They really wanted to but they turned round and were like, ‘but mummy, isn’t rugby a girls sport?’. Because my partner doesn’t play, they’ve only ever seen me play. So, it’s a bit of a refreshing view in some ways!”

Words of wisdom

Each of the women had some final words of wisdom to share for any expectant rugby-mum’s, parents who are considering getting into the game, and food for thought for other club’s across the country.

Sammy’s advice is for women who have had a c-section: “There isn’t a lot of information out there on how to return to sport, and I didn’t get much support from a medical point of view other than a recommended timeline of when I could start running and weight training after my c-section.

“I did something called a ‘Mummy MOT’ with a physio and that was really helpful. It just helps you know you’re in a good place to go back to physical activity.”

For Chloe, she wants to encourage more mothers into the game: “The thought of getting back to rugby after you’ve had your baby is hard, but honestly, just do it. I know it’s easier for me to say that now that I am back at training, but you have to remember it’s only a wee break you’ve taken and as the other girls have said, getting the exercise and socialising through rugby is so important for you as a person and parent.

“We have other people in the team who had never played rugby before starting a family, but they’re now training with us. And if you ask them what motivated them, they always talk about how inclusive the sport is, that it’s a welcoming environment and seems a positive place to be for their family. And it’s true. It’s nice to see that rugby is appealing to other parents who haven’t played before.”

Jess believes more clubs should embrace changes to make their facilities more inclusive, saying: “Make your clubhouse as accessible as possible for parents. It’s important that the clubhouse is a welcoming, supportive environment, equipped to support families. It’s not just about supporting players who are parents, it’s about supporters and partners too.

“Our clubhouse is such a different environment now that we have the provisions to support people with babies and young families. The changes we’ve made have brought in new people, created a better dynamic and it’s the best it’s ever been.”

And finally, Sam wants all women to know that they can do it too, adding: “We’re lucky with rugby that it is such an inclusive sport. There is a position and a space for everyone. For any mum’s out there who want to give rugby a go, just know that you can do it. You are every bit as capable as other women, and as other men. Your team-mates will support you every step of the way.”

Club Webpage: <https://www.pitchero.com/clubs/gariochrugbyfootballclub2/>