

# McAdam Travel Bursary 2022

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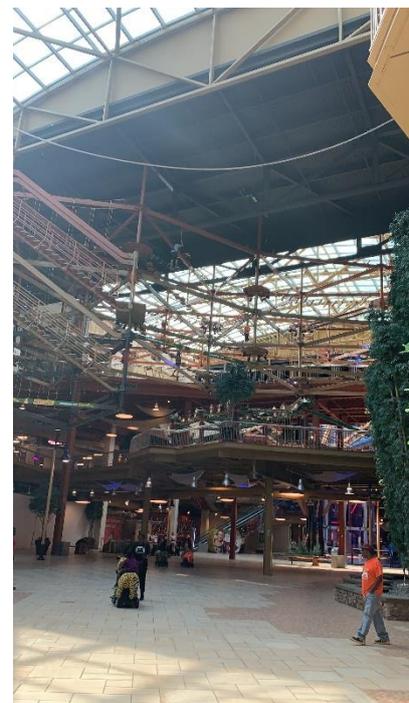
In my McAdam Travel Bursary Proposal, I described the opportunity for personal development and growth available to me through coaching at a Leinster School of Excellence in Syracuse, upstate New York. This camp would be the first of its kind in United States, having been extremely successful here in Ireland for the past couple of year. As someone passionate about rugby, having played it since the age of 5, I had recently become very interested in coaching rugby after taking up a role as a coach for the U15s at Lansdowne FC in Dublin. Over my first year of coaching, I grew to have a huge interest in helping younger rugby players to develop on and off the pitch. I was offered to coach at the camp by Nigel Osbourne, a leader in the space of coaching young players rugby having run the Rugby and French Camp located near Biarritz, France for over 24 years with 1000s of students. The camp would take place over a week at the beginning of August on the campus of the Syracuse University. This offer was a no-brainer decision:

- I get to travel to another country and explore part of the US and their culture, make memories, and meet new people,
- I would be able spend time helping young rugby players in America learn about rugby and improve their skills in a sport I am very passionate about,
- And I get to learn from highly experienced rugby coaches to develop my own coaching skills.

I had to go! There was no doubt in my mind that there would be plenty of areas for personal development and growth if I could make my way out there. All the areas of growth may not be obvious in how it would be applicable to my future career in chemical engineering but there would be loads. By getting to the States, this also meant I would also be able to get the chance to visit some friends and family.

## Syracuse

From Dublin I flew to Syracuse Hancock International Airport via New York. Flying into Syracuse the day before the camp kicked off allowed me time to explore parts of Syracuse that I wouldn't have the opportunity to visit once the camp kicked off. A quick Google search had me going to the Destiny USA, the 5<sup>th</sup> largest mall in the US. The sheer size of the place was somewhat overwhelming. There were at least 4 floors of shops sprawled out as far as the eye could see, but the biggest shock I got was when I saw the jungle gym. As you walked from shop to shop, overhead there were kids swinging from rope-to-rope and shouting as they tried to get as high as they could. Once that I had finished getting lost in the mall more than enough times, I made my way to the Sheraton University Hotel where we would be staying for the coming days. None of the other coaches had arrived yet so I got the room set up and went for a run at local American Football pitch. The view out to the University from the room window the following morning was awesome.





## **Syracuse University**

Syracuse is in upstate New York with around 150,000 during college months. I found it the place relatively quiet due and most building closed due to it being the summer months. The university is located in downtown and was founded way back in 1870. Some of the more notable people who graduated from the university were the current president Joe Biden, and Carmelo Anthony, the professional basketballer. At the moment it is ranked 62<sup>nd</sup> out of 443 universities in the US. I went for a short walk one of the mornings to have a look at the college buildings. The university has a College of Engineering and Computer Science with a Department of Biomedical and Chemical Engineering. I found some of the architecture of the buildings around the campus very impressive. There was a long walkway through the campus that had on one side, older buildings, like ones you would see in movies and on the other side, larger more modern buildings.

## **JMA Wireless Dome**

Being a major sports fan, I was really interested in what the athletics side of the university was about. Before flying out I had done a quick internet search. The university teams have the nickname of "the Orange", with their mascot being Otto the Orange. During our stay, we were given the opportunity to visit the JMA Wireless Dome. Gabe, our local contact for the camp who helped organise everything and made sure we had all the gear we needed for the camp, took us to the stadium. This is the stadium that you could see from my bedroom window. It is home to the college's football, basketball, and lacrosse teams. The stadium can hold up to 50,000 and has the record for the total home court attendance in season for men's basketball. During our visit they were carrying out \$45 million worth of renovations but were still allowed to walk out into the middle of it and grab a few pictures. I was genuinely in awe of the size of the dome. You could almost imagine the intensity of the atmosphere that would be there during a college game with a packed crowd. Around

the top above the seats hung huge flags displaying their national championship wins, lacrosse was by far the most common.



## The First US-based Leinster School of Excellence

I had known Nigel Osbourne, the head coach of the camp, for a few years so it was good to catch up with him as long with Ntinga Mpikol the other assistant coach at the camp. The Leinster School of Excellence kicked off the morning of my second day in Syracuse. We had no idea what the quality of the camp would be like in the lead up so when we heard that there would be over 40 kids travelling from all around, we knew we would be kept busy for our first day of the camp. The first day was centred around introducing ourselves, getting to know their names, what they knew about rugby, and what they wanted to get out of the camp. Based around the popularity of rugby in the US there wasn't a high expectation that the quality would be of a high standard that we were used to at home. They blew our expectations out of the water. The group was mixed boys and girls, all full of energy. Some had played rugby for the last 10 years, some had decided this camp would be their first shot at it, but they all came with the same enthusiasm, they really wanted to be there. Comparing this to my time coaching at home, I was used to having to work with kids who didn't always want to be at training on a Sunday morning. It was a genuine pleasure. One of the things that Nigel said that stuck with me was 'If we can bring energy and enjoy it, so will they.'



The days were typically broken into three parts. We would begin the day rotating the kids through three stations where one coach would work on a specific skill with them. Being a scrumhalf, and having spent hour and hours at it, passing was my go-to. It is a fundamental part of the game that every player must be able to do. With passing being my speciality, I started small on the first day, taking them through the fundamentals of the how to hold the ball to what to do with your hands after you pass, then for the following mornings I increased the technicality and the difficulty. I wasn't going to be able to make them all perfect within the timeframe we had so I was sure to give them information that was simple, and actions

they could take away from the camp and work on themselves. The challenge here was getting the information I had in my head, what I understand as how to pass a ball, and passing it on to them in a manner that was simple and made sense to them. I had to imagine myself in their shoes, I wasn't sure how to pass a ball, so where would I start? This really seemed to work. Once I could get them to really think about each and every pass, focusing on one aspect like their follow through, you could begin to see them thinking about it and asking questions. Having a group of boys and girls of mixed ability we had to remove the majority, if not all, of the uncontrolled contact. This is hard for kids who enjoy playing rugby because it's a physical game, but safety had to be our number one priority. Its important to also say that we made time to let the kids have fun. We incorporated fun little games and challenges during our breaks that didn't have anything got to do with rugby. It gave them the chance to get to know one another better and had them laughing and messing.



After the morning session, it was lunch time. Lunch was provided and gave us the opportunity to sit down and chat with these young people to get to know them better. A lot of them were from upstate New York, cities such Buffalo or Albany. They had to travel up to 3 hours to get to Syracuse. But they did it because they really loved rugby. You could see that the level of coaching in the US is just not at the same standard as it is in Ireland, and that is understandable when you think of the popularity of sports like American football and basketball that rugby must compete with. These kids played rugby because they could enjoy a lot more. It allows for all shapes and sizes. They told me that other sports didn't have the same comradery or sportsmanship like rugby did, and that's what makes its special. This was awesome to hear, and I could see really resonate with them. Rugby is founded on values that makes it different from other sports. Coming from Ireland and getting to see (and be reminded) the sport has the exact same values on a different continent makes me grateful that I was fortunate to have taken to it at a young age.

Lunch times were also a chance for us to talk to the group as a whole and present some information that myself and Ntinga knew from playing rugby at a relatively high level. We chatted about importance of areas such as nutrition, resistance training, recovery, and even managed to fit a video review where we watched parts of the recent All Blacks and Ireland game, where Ireland managed to win their first ever series against the All Blacks. These were great opportunities for the kids to ask questions and to learn about how important looking after yourself off the field is and how it can lead to improvement on the field. I spent time chatting and working with other scrumhalves on their passing, outhalves on their kicking, and the back-three on their high ball catching.



The afternoon sessions were used as times to play games and matches where they could implement the skills we had worked on in the evening. This where you got to see the kids really flourish. As coaches, we were there to facilitate their love of the game and to allow them to express themselves. One of the biggest challenges for kids and coaches alike was the heat. With a constant 25 to 30°C bearing down on us and no cloud cover we had to make sure the kids were drinking plenty of water and getting enough breaks. Sunscreen was provided so we made sure that everyone was making use of it before every session. There were one or two incidents of kids feeling lightheaded with the heat, so they were removed to shade, and we tailored the sessions to ensure it didn't happen again. Its safe to say arms weren't immune to harshness sun either!



The camp finished up at the end of the week and we said all our goodbyes. You could see guys swapping their social media details so they could keep in contact, there were hugs, and for some reason they all wanted pictures with us, the coaches. It was hard not to be happy, albeit it was coming to the end of an awesome week. Being told that that one of the girls learnt more from me in a few days than she had in her previous 5 years of playing rugby brought out a special feeling in me. I had no idea really what to expect from the camp. It could have been a disaster, it could have rained all the days, the kids could have been miserable, and on and on the things that could have gone wrong... but they didn't. There was no stage of I felt fatigued or frustration or that I wanted to take a break. It was the kids that made it as special as it was. Things like being guided through my first handstand by a few of the girls, challenging the other coaches in a press up competition, getting brought to 'the best BBQ joint in town', and on and on. Each day carried their own unique lessons and challenges, challenges that were exciting to take on headfirst. Its hard to put into words what the camp makes me feel when I look back on it but all I can say it brings out a smile.

With both the men's and women's Rugby World Cups being held in the US in 2031 and 2033, respectively, I know I'll be seeing some of those kids starring on the field for team USA.



## New Hampshire & New York

With this being my first time in the United States since I was 5 years old, I was able to visit my cousin, Sinead, her husband Chris and their three kids for the weekend, right before my flight out of New York on Monday evening. They invited me up to their 'cabin in the woods' house just outside a small town called Sunapee in New Hampshire. It was picturesque. At the same time, my other cousin visited while he was on his J1 in Boston, so the 'cabin' was full to the brim with all 7 of us! A 5-minute walk down the road brought you to a small lake. Here we spent our time paddle boarding, playing cards, barbecuing, and eating s'mores. I hadn't met her three kids before and its fair to say we had a ball. This was a great way to finish the trip. My flight was out of New York, so I took the bus down (over 5 hours!) and managed a quick trip over to Times Square for a look before making my way to JFK airport.



## Conclusion and Thank You

I'd like to say a massive thank you to Martin McAdam and his family for this bursary. The whole experience of my trip to the US has made the summer one I will never forget. This would not have been possible without their generosity. I have developed more than I could have ever thought. It's only been a short time since the trip, and I already feel the significant impact it has had personal and professional progression. I now clearly see that generosity and helping others are things that I value so it's important to me that I continue to find time for giving to others in whatever way I can. My confidence has skyrocketed. Stepping up in front of groups and finding the mindset of being comfortable and content with who you are in this moment has really been eye-opening for me.

I couldn't get over the quality of the players in the US, especially the girls. They were driven and determined to improve. The fact that these kids were willing to travel to go to the camp has shown me just how much growth the US will see in rugby over the next decade and the opens the idea of holding the camps all over the US. This was held in a small city in the upper half of one of 52 states... the opportunities are endless, especially with the World Cups being held here at the start of the next century.

As I have learnt, for a big goals or tasks I must break it down and take it one step at a time and to remember to bring the energy and enjoy it. Based on my time in Syracuse this summer, I am open to coaching roles that may crop up as I have found real enjoyment and satisfaction in seeing young people develop, and I know that it can only contribute to my own personal development, while potentially opening me up to more opportunities. Although not confirmed, there is likely to be a longer camp held in the US for next summer which I have already been asked to be involved in if it gets the go ahead!