

‘Rugby gives you values: they aren’t written but they are for life’ Interview with Felipe Contepomi

By Edmundo Murray

Talking to Felipe Contepomi evokes exciting moments in our sporting lives, whether as players or supporters. It is also a way to learn, in a peculiar way, about playing professional rugby with the enthusiasm of an amateur. Born in Buenos Aires, Contepomi went to study at Cardenal Newman School, run by the Irish Christian Brothers, in the outskirts of the city. He started playing rugby at the school, and was quickly picked for the junior selections in Buenos Aires and later at the national level. He has played more than fifty games with The Pumas. His twin brother Manuel is also a player in the national team. A star of the Leinster Rugby team in Ireland, Felipe is also a medical doctor, having graduated from the Royal College of Surgeons. He lives in Dublin with his wife Paula and their daughter Catalina.

Edmundo Murray (**EM**): What influence has your Irish school education had on your life and on your rugby-playing?

Felipe Contepomi (**FP**): [Cardenal] Newman was and still is important in my life. It was my second home, and had a great effect on my educational and life values, and of course on my rugby-playing. Today when you speak of my career, the first milestone is always *el Newman*. It is an Irish school with high standards, and I was conscious of the Irish character of the school from the beginning, for instance during the Irish tournaments. Indeed, having studied at Newman school was important in later decisions that I made, like when I was offered the chance to play for Leinster.

EM: You studied to be a medical doctor, and were awarded MB, BCh and BAO degrees by the Royal College of Surgeons in Dublin. How difficult do you find studying and playing professional rugby in Ireland?

FP: Some consider that being a good player and a good student is not possible. And perhaps medicine is not the most common of university studies for a rugby player. But there are many professional players who are studying. Of course sometimes it is difficult to do both things together, but I don’t think it is a sacrifice. I didn’t study just for the sake of it. If you want to be a medical doctor you need to make some concessions, but you can also make some good choices to link both activities. I selected orthopaedics as my speciality.



Felipe Contepomi during British & Irish Lions vs Argentina, Cardiff, May 2005
(Prensa Unión Argentina de Rugby)

EM: If rugby becomes professional in Argentina, do you think it would lead to the demise of vibrant club-level rugby, as is claimed to have happened in Ireland and Wales?

FP: In my view, professional rugby must be built on the foundations of the amateur activity and its values. It's not just money that counts, as so many people think in Argentina. As I learnt at Newman School, education and values are key elements of rugby, whether professional or amateur. In Argentina we have the advantage of being late entrants to professional rugby. We can learn from others to avoid mistakes. Our greatest fault is to think that we need to reinvent the wheel. However, we need to keep the amateur infrastructure in order to develop professional rugby.

EM: Even if the adjective is a little strong, do you consider yourself a nationalist?

FP: Yes, it is strong and ambiguous too. In a way, I can't uproot myself from my origins. One has to be aware of the place one comes from. On the other hand, I am very open to changes ... to the future. I do believe in the common good for anyone, independently of the society in which you are born or educated. In rugby, this means that I must play at 100 percent of my strength and passion, whether for Bristol, Leinster or The Pumas. And yet, your country's jersey is so powerful! Playing rugby means that you must respect others, and your team-mates. Compared to other sports, rugby gives you values, not just entertainment. At least in Argentina, from an early age you are linked to a club, a group of friends, a society. If there are good relationships amongst the group, the results will be seen in the field. We have to consider that rugby has a long history of amateurism. Football started to be professional in the 1930s, while rugby didn't eliminate restrictions on professionalism until the 1990s. We had a century of amateur values in our activity before becoming professionals.

EM: Why was the image of The Pumas singing the Argentine national anthem the one that you wished to give to the public?

FP: We sang spontaneously what we felt at the time. It was our mood. We always sing out loud

and intensely. Some journalists made a big deal of it, but we liked it that way. And the musical version that they played helped us to sing in that way.

EM: Rugby has adapted to diverse cultures in different places. While in southern France, for instance, it has a strong rural character, in Argentina is more urban and has been traditionally upper-class.

FP: Yes, it is true that before rugby was more-or-less an elite entertainment. But since 1999 there has been a complete change in the situation, and the activity has grown enormously. Now it is more popular, and more people from diverse social origins are attracted to rugby.

EM: During the 2007 World Cup you publicly criticised the embattled Irish coach Eddie O'Sullivan. Was this motivated by a personal enmity against the coach?

FP: I did not criticise Eddie O'Sullivan. At that time, people in Ireland were certain that they would reach the semi-finals, and they did not consider otherwise. Professional coaches are hired to build successful teams. If they don't, they are fired the day after losing the match, and that is what I said about Eddie O'Sullivan. This doesn't happen only with the Irish coaches. Take a look at the Australians, the French. Professionalism requires getting results. That's all I said. However, I guess I did not like O'Sullivan's comments after his team lost to the Pumas. It is always easier to blame others instead of recognising what you yourself have done wrong.

EM: Do you think that night in Lens in 1999 (when Ireland lost the chance for a place for the world cup semi-final in Dublin) has created a long legacy of bitterness and begrudgery, particularly among the Irish coaching staff and management, towards Argentina, or do the roots of the enmity run deeper than that?

FP: What happened is that the Pumas shocked Ireland. The Irish players and coaches couldn't believe that they were losing to Argentina. When we checked in at the hotel that evening we saw the luggage left by some of the Irish

players who couldn't conceive of the idea that they would have to check out, because they were certain that the boys in green would secure the semi-finals. There isn't such an enmity towards Argentina; I actually experienced the opposite from players, management and supporters. You should see how well they consider us when we win over Ireland. They really understand fair play, and you can see their good feelings especially when they aren't so lucky.

EM: That's something you definitively don't see among the French supporters.

FP: (laughs) Not at all.

EM: Do you find a condescending attitude among the IRB and established home unions towards Argentina?

FP: No. I think that the IRB wants to help Argentina to establish an international rugby infrastructure. But there are two important factors we need to take into account. Today's rugby is professional and consequently, it is a business. If Argentina does not present a potential business for the international community it will be very hard to break in.

EM: Jorge Búsico, the famous rugby journalist, wrote a piece during the rugby world cup on the Pumas being a metaphor for the country that Argentines would like their country to be: orderly, non-corrupt and respectful. He wrote that football represented their country as it actually is: corrupt, disorderly and characterised by random violence and lack of respect. Would you agree with these sentiments?

FP: I would challenge those comparisons between football and rugby. Most of the Argentine football players give their best in the

field. They travel frequently and to remote locations, keeping to crazy schedules, and they have to play a few hours after landing. Then they try to deliver an excellent game. Some people in Argentina say that football players 'earn millions', and in some cases this may be true. But the physical and psychological effort must be contributed either way. Every sporting activity has its own idiosyncrasy, and we have to respect that.

EM: How did you adjust to life in Ireland? Did you have to adapt to professional rugby?

FP: It was - and still is - difficult to be far from home. Of course we miss family and friends in Argentina. However professionalism wasn't new for me. I came from Bristol and even before that, as an amateur, I always played in a responsible and professional way. People should realise that, whether professionals or amateurs, we must respect and try to fulfil players' and supporters' expectations.

EM: Unless you suffer an injury, you will be on the first Argentine team to play in Croke Park in November this year. What are your views on this?

FP: I am aware of Croke Park's historical background and I understand its symbolic significance to the Irish, as well as its associations with national pride in Ireland. Indeed, playing there will be very important for me personally, especially now that I have so many friends here. This is a sport that gives you a lot of rewards. But more than anything else, rugby gives you values. They aren't written, but they are for life, and I wish to maintain them beyond the activity itself.

Edmundo Murray

Profile

Felipe Contepomi, born on 20 August 1977 to Carlos Contepomi and María Elena Ferrante in San Isidro, Greater Buenos Aires, is an Argentine international (Pumas) rugby union outhalf and centre, who plays club rugby for Leinster in Ireland.

Felipe was educated at the Irish Christian Brothers school, Cardenal Newman, in Bolougne, Buenos Aires, where he honed his rugby skills. His passion for rugby was inherited from his father, Carlos, a former Puma captain and coach and member of Buenos Aires Cricket and Rugby Club (Bici), who himself started playing rugby at Cardenal Newman.

Initially Felipe began his rugby career as flanker, before switching to outhalf in the Junior Divisions, following in the footsteps of his father, who had also been an outhalf. In the Junior Divisions he was a member of a number of teams that won various under-age competitions, including Under-15, 16 and 19. He also played rugby Sevens at under-age level. Following his return from the Under-19 World Cup, he joined Club Newman's team, alongside his twin brother Manuel, making his debut against Deportiva Francesa. Following the completion of his secondary schooling he started medical school at the Universidad de Buenos Aires, whilst continuing to play amateur rugby for Newman. Among his achievements at senior amateur level were reaching the national club semi-finals in 1997 and a championship. He was appointed captain of the team in 2000.

Enticed by his fellow Puma Agustín Pichot, he moved to the English West Country to play professional rugby with Premiership team Bristol in 2001. In the 2001-2002 season Bristol finished the season with the most bonus points in the Zurich Premiership, and reached the final of the Zurich Championship at Twickenham, securing a place in the Heineken Cup for the 2002-2003 season. In the semi-final against Northampton, Felipe scored all 32 points. His tally for the season was 221 points.

The following year, ownership problems caused by the pullout of an investor created a crisis at the club and Bristol were relegated. Following the 2003 Rugby World Cup, with offers from Leinster, and English and French clubs, he opted for Leinster as it allowed him to combine his professional career with the resumption of his medical studies. In his first two seasons at the club, Felipe alternated between outhalf and centre, playing a less influential role in the team. With the arrival of a new head coach Michael Cheika and assistant coach David Knox, Felipe became the indisputable outhalf. The 2005-2006 season was particularly memorable, with Leinster coming second in the Celtic League and reaching the semi-final of the European Heineken Cup. Felipe was the top points scorer in both competitions. He won the Irish Rugby Players Association 'Best Rugby Player of the Year' award for the 2005-2006 season, as well as the Leinster 'Best Player of the Year' award.

Since making his international debut for the Pumas against Chile in 1998, Felipe has played in three World Cups (1999, 2003 and 2007). He was one of the stars of the Argentine team during the 2007 Rugby World Cup, helping the team to beat Ireland and favourites France to reach the top of their pool and reach the quarter finals of the World Cup, subsequently winning the quarter-final against Scotland. In the third-place play-off against France where Argentina won 34-10, Felipe scored two tries, three conversions and one penalty. He was the second highest points scorer in the tournament, just behind Percy Montgomery of South Africa. Other international honours include the captaincy of the Pumas in their historic 25-25 draw against the British and Irish Lions in Cardiff in May 2005.

In October 2007, he was one of five people short-listed for the ultimate accolade in the sport, the International Rugby Board (IRB) 'Player of the Year Award', along with team-mate Juan Martín Hernández. The award was eventually won by Bryan Habana of South Africa. In recognition of his outstanding performance both at Leinster and in the Rugby World Cup, he was awarded the 'Guinness Rugby Writers' Player of The Year Award' in Ireland. Not only on the sporting front was 2007 a year of achievement for Felipe, but also on the educational front, as he graduated with his medical degree from the Royal College of Surgeons. The Irish current affairs magazine *Village* named him as Person of the Year for 2007, not only for his accomplishments on the rugby field, but also for his achievement in qualifying in medicine at the same time as being a professional player.