

Rugby Union

‘Diagnosis helped put me on a forward path’

Former Scotland prop Geoff Cross, now working as a GP, on how he copes after discovering that he was dyslexic

MARK PALMER



Scottish Rugby Correspondent

It was as he undertook the latter stages of his training to become a GP that Geoff Cross first began to seriously suspect he might have an issue. The former Edinburgh, Borders, Glasgow, London Irish and Scotland prop – who completed a medical degree before entering the professional game – had always been a high achiever, but something about the volume and intensity of what this latest challenge demanded was seeing him run up against a mental brick wall.

“My trainers would say, ‘You’re passing all your exams, you’re carrying out all the things you’ve got to do and all the boxes are being ticked. But there’s something not right in the variability of your performance: eight or nine times out of ten, you’re spot on for a week, and then once or twice there will be some sort of cognitive leap or decision or action that just doesn’t seem to fit. That could be a barrier to progression because of the standards required for performance and consistency in general practice.’

“I liken it to what pilots experience in a cockpit when things get really busy. The weather’s bad and something’s going wrong. Then there’s another issue and people are shouting at you and there’s a smell of smoke. And you start doing something called workload shedding.

“Everybody has a working memory and there’ll be some average number of things that people can hold in their working memory. What my assessment showed was a typically spiky profile of different cognitive abilities.

“The thing that was lower than you’d expect for where the other bits of my cognitive functions were, was the short-term and working memory. So holding onto bits of information.

“Simply put, most people could hold onto six things, I could hold onto four on average. And if I was a bit tired or a bit hungry, mine would drop down to two or three, whereas other people’s might drop down to five.

“Because I’ve got this smaller box to process things, I can’t hold onto too much before it starts getting dropped through workload shedding. Everyone has a cup, and you need to manage the fullness of it.”

Cross’s assessment was for dyslexia, fundamentally an information processing problem which can come

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to the fore in “multi-tasking” situations that involve the written or spoken word. Dyslexia being duly identified was an important moment for the 42-year-old, but, he maintains, nowhere near as transformative as the support that was then put in place by his prospective employers in the NHS.

“One thing that the performance support unit were talking about was, ‘Look, you’ve gone to primary school, you’ve gone to secondary school, you’ve had a job, you’ve gone to university, you’ve got a degree. You’re doing something right, so let’s see how we can build on that.’

“Their approach was: ‘if there’s an amount of information that you can deal with that’s safe and consistent, let’s give you that amount of information to deal with and not more. And let’s build that up as you refine and get better.’ It might be about slightly longer appointments, a slightly lower number of patients. It might mean that perhaps I’m not going to be the doctor that rips through 50 people in a day like some other people can. I might be closer to the sort of averages that the doctors’ union are talking about where they suggest 12 patient contacts per session if they’re of a standard complexity.

“Some sorts of cases are more complex and are just going to take longer and others are a bit simpler and pop through a bit faster so we can wiggle that number about. But maybe I’m going to be closer to that and on bad days a bit lower while always delivering sustainable, safe care.

“One big help has been voice-to-text information entry and Global AutoCorrect [an intelligent spelling software designed for people with



dyslexia], which reduces the cognitive load of having to go back and look at all the times you typed ‘adn’ instead of ‘and’. The actual grinding text entry is eased. That frees up other bits of your brain to get through more work or think more clearly about things. That in turn reduces the cognitive wobbles.”

Those “wobbles” are evident to Cross when he thinks back to his past lives: having to take power naps in the university library or struggling to simultaneously take in multiple layers of opposition analysis in the build-up to a rugby match.

“Those naps were, I think, running repairs,” he says. “It [the extreme

tiredness] would come on very quickly and it was usually around cognitive things; reading and information processing. It wouldn’t happen when I was out walking about or playing a game or speaking to people. It was mainly just sitting and reading; information processing situations with a view to building knowledge.

“In my rugby-playing days, people would say I overthought things. But I know now that I have to shift things around to process them whereas someone else can just do in one smooth sweep. You can’t really take credit for or be criticised for having traits. But you are responsible for being judged by the standards of the

arena you choose to enter, in my case professional rugby: a real high-support, high-challenge environment.

“I found it a hell of a good fun ride. I really enjoyed doing that. Sometimes I did get lineup codes wrong. And I don’t think it was just down to the way I processed information. But it could have been a factor.”

In tandem with his dyslexia assessment, Cross was examined at Scottish Rugby’s brain health clinic. “There was a concern from some of the trainers: ‘he’s a bit older, he had a job where the risk of getting bangs on the head was higher. Has there been a cognitive hangover from that?’ What the brain health clinic assessment

CRAIG WATSON FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES



Geoff Cross, above, has had quite a journey since his rugby-playing days including 40 appearances for Scotland, right

provided was a body of evidence that from at least a structural and a functional point of view, there was nothing to see there yet.”

Cross and his wife Helen, an acclaimed author and horticulturalist, are alive to the fact that dyslexia is highly genetic and often runs in families. Indeed, the 40-times capped former tight-head believes he may have already been thinking ahead when it came to naming the eldest of his three sons, ten-year-old Otto.

“There were lots of reasons that I thought Otto was a good name. But one of them was that it was four letters long, made up of only two letters and a palindrome, so really difficult to cock up. Maybe that was part of me saying, ‘this will be good if he’s dyslexic.’”

The family are settled in Glasgow’s southside, with Cross thriving as a locum GP in various locations across Scotland’s biggest city.

“My situation is a demonstration of a successful, effective and strong training programme. Rather than that Spartan-style thinking that if you’re not perfect we throw you off the cliff. Down the years, I think there was a bit of reverse self-flagellating going on with me. I’d call it medic’s pride where there was a little bit of, ‘I might be dyslexic, but I’m managing, so I mustn’t grumble. And actually, I’m a little bit smug that I’m passing an exam and getting the results I am.’ This [dyslexia] might or might not be the case. And I half wonder about it.

“But it’s not a problem: I’m managing so I’ll just keep cracking on’.

“In the 1980s, when I was growing up, the standing joke was that dyslexia was what middle class children had when their parents didn’t want to say they were thick. Thankfully we’ve evolved from that to considering it as something that can be a problem for some people in some situations, but where there are support structures you can put in place that minimise the difficulties and make your life a bit easier.”



Warriors lost on Friday but Franco Smith remained upbeat about his side

Smith looking for positives to boost battered Warriors

Head coach puts brave face on defeat by Bulls but injuries continue to plague his Glasgow side

Mark Palmer

Glasgow’s 26-19 defeat by the Bulls threatens to have significant implications on how the rest of their season pans out, but there was also an immediate cost for Franco Smith to count in the shape of a further batch of injuries.

The Warriors’ squad depth has been severely tested all year by a succession of high-profile absentees, and while Sione Vailanu, Scott Cummings, Max Williams and Josh McKay have all returned in recent weeks, the Scotstoun side are still missing Sione Tuipulotu, Huw Jones, Jack Dempsey, the Fagerson brothers, Rory Sutherland, JP du Preez and Henco Venter as well as the fringe men Duncan Weir, Angus Fraser, Ally Miller and Fin Richardson.

In a further indication of how things have been going on the injury front, McKay, the ultra-consistent full back, went down again last midweek days after producing a man of the match display against Zebre on his return from ankle surgery.

In the course of a bruising battle with the South Africans, meanwhile, Jack Mann (pectoral muscle/chest), Gregor Brown (knee) and Patrick Schickerling (foot) were all forced off with what Smith described as potentially concerning “trauma” injuries, while Kyle Rowe hobbled from the fray shortly before half-time and Williamson and Sebastián Cancelliere were also in the wars. Glasgow have a fortnight before their next match, away to Benetton on May 10, and with Tuipulotu and Jones both on course to feature in that game the news is not all bad, but Smith’s ingenuity when it comes to squad management is being tested like never before.

“We’re concerned about it, but at the same time, now we’ve got a week off, which we’re going to use very well,” the head coach said. “There are some other bodies coming back in the building – it was good to see Scott Cummings coming back after a fractured arm and be confident against a very physical pack. That was heartwarming.

“Max Williamson played 60

minutes now, we’ve built it nicely with him, 20-40-60 [minutes]. Then you have McKay, Tuipulotu, Jones, the Fagersons, Henco Venter all sitting in the background. [The tight-head prop] Murphy Walker is on his way back. So there are a lot of positives still to be added. We’re just going to keep on preparing ourselves to play in the final games.”

Smith was determined to put a brave face on the loss to the side they so famously put away in last year’s Pretoria final, but even though Glasgow remain a point ahead of the Bulls in second place, Jake White’s men will fancy their chances of elbowing their way past – and securing home advantage in any semi-final – in the course of home games against Cardiff and Dragons. The Warriors must return to the Aviva Stadium, scene of that recent 52-0 Champions Cup shellacking by Leinster, the week after their trip to Treviso.

“I asked the boys, who wants to play the semi-final at home? And they all raised their hands,” Smith reported. “I said, ‘well, we know we want to do that. But if we don’t, we’ve already qualified for the quarter-finals at home. It’s exactly the position we were in last year and we got it done’. There’s great character in this group. We are a little bit depleted and under the pump around various injuries. But again, if you are the main target of everybody in the competition, you would expect the boys to be physically challenged every week. So nothing is different to last year.

“We’ve done brilliantly up to now. There are so many accolades that should come to these boys, and they’re physically tired. Most of them have played four Test matches in November and they’ve played the whole Six Nations. We have played five games without our internationals and we’re still top of the log [apart from Leinster]. So is the programme working? Are we in a right good place? Fantastic. Do we need to kick the can over because we lost on Friday night? No. If I was a Glasgow Warriors supporter, I would still be very, very proud and excited about what can happen.”

McGhie’s dramatic late try gives Scots win over Ireland



Scotland

26



Ireland

19

Daire Walsh

Francesca McGhie grabbed an 81st-minute converted try as an injury-hit Ireland ended their Women’s Six Nations campaign with a defeat by Scotland at Hive Stadium in Edinburgh.

While a losing bonus point was enough to secure a second consecutive third-place finish in the Championship, there will be disappointment among the Irish camp that they weren’t able to add to wins against Italy and Wales.

Although there was plenty of experience in Ireland’s starting lineup, the Munster and UL Bohemian

star Aoife Corey was drafted into the full-back position for her international test debut. Vicky Elmes Kinlan was named on the right wing for a first start in this year’s Championship and there was another debutant off the bench in the form of Jane Clohessy – daughter of the former Ireland men’s international Peter Clohessy.

Ireland drew first blood in this contest on the stroke of ten minutes. After she had broken at pace into the opposition 22, scrum half Molly Scuffil-McCabe released the winger Amee-Leigh Costigan for a typically clinical finish over the whitewash in the left-corner. This was the Tipperary woman’s third try of the tournament and with Dannah O’Brien superbly splitting the uprigths from a touchline conversion, Ireland established a seven-point platform.

There was to be a setback for the



Francesca McGhie’s try won it for Scotland

visitors in the 18th minute when Dorothy Wall was withdrawn through injury. This could be a significant concern for the head coach Scott Bemand ahead of the Rugby World Cup, which gets under way for Ireland against Japan in Northampton on August 24.

The Irish weren’t being placed under too much defensive pressure in the Hive – until superb work from the influential Evie Gallagher secured Scotland an attacking penalty on 25 minutes. The fly half Helen Nelson opted to kick the ball to touch on the left flank and it paid dividends for the home team when the hooker Lana Skeldon got on the back of the ensuing lineup maul for her 19th international try.

A miss conversion attempt from Nelson kept their opponents in the ascendancy, but even though they ended the opening period with 72 per cent possession, Ireland were

ultimately 12-7 adrift at the interval courtesy of a converted try in stoppage-time from Emma Orr.

O’Brien’s failure to kick the ball out of play when the clock was in the red proved costly and with the captain Edel McMahon and Enya Breen joining Wall in being forced off with injuries, Ireland needed to rediscover their attacking groove.

The tight-head prop Linda Djougang was twice held up by the Scottish defence in the first half, yet after the intervention of the TMO nine minutes after the restart, she was finally adjudged to have dotted down beyond the Scotland line for an unconverted five-pointer.

This coincided with the sin-binning of the Scotland winger Rhona Lloyd for a head-high tackle on Costigan, but before Bryan Easson’s side were restored to their full complement of players, Rachel McLachlan had rounded off an

extended attack in the 58th minute with a try on the left wing.

An outstanding Nelson conversion left Ireland staring into a seven-point deficit inside the final quarter, but the visiting side subsequently put the Scots under relentless set-piece pressure.

From a tap and go by Clodhna

Women’s Six Nations

	P	W	D	L	F	A	B	Pts
England	5	5	0	0	256	71	8	28
France	5	4	0	1	183	106	5	21
Ireland	5	2	0	3	133	128	3	11
Scotland	4	2	0	3	89	162	1	9
Italy	4	1	0	3	63	143	1	5
Wales	4	0	0	4	59	173	1	1

Moloney, fellow replacement Emily Lane pounced for her maiden international try. O’Brien added the bonuses to ensure the sides were now inseparable on the scoreboard.

Late in the game Scotland moved the ball towards the far side off a line-out move on the right wing and McGhie was on hand to ground a Lucia Scott pass.

Scorers: Scotland: Tries L Skeldon (25 mins), E Orr (40+2), R McLachlan (58), F McGhie (80+1) Cons H Nelson (40+3, 59, 80+2) Ireland: Tries A-L Costigan (10), L Djougang (49), E Lane (72) Cons D O’Brien (11, 73) Scotland C Rollicie; R Lloyd (L Scott 59), E Orr, L Thomson, F McGhie; H Nelson, L Brehner-Holden; L Bartlett (A Young 46), L Skeldon (E Martin 64), E Clarke (M Poolman 64); J Konkel, S Bonar; R Malcolm, R McLachlan, E Gallagher. Ireland A Corey; V Elmes Kinlan (S Flood 47), A Dalton, E Breen (E Higgins 39), A-L Costigan; D O’Brien, M Scuffil-McCabe (E Lane 64); N O’Dowd (S McGrath 9-18 & 64), N Jones (C Moloney 64), L Djougang (C Haney 64); R Campbell, F Tuite; D Wall (C Boles 18), E McMahon (J Clohessy 22), B Hogan. Referee N Ganley (New Zealand).