

From the bomb squad to the sports field

She is no stranger to being in the firing line having headed up the bomb squad in her previous working life.

But Brigadier Irena Dzisiewska is under no misapprehension about the heat she is about to face after becoming the first female director of sport at Millfield School in Somerset.

Having just been acknowledged as the best sports school in the country for the tenth time in the last eleven years, maintaining and developing that sporting status will be key to Irena's brief.

Sport at Millfield has always been so much more than an extra-curricular activity. It is deeply embedded into school life and coexists alongside the academic aspects of schooling seamlessly.

During extended lunchtimes, before and after school, hundreds of children can be seen utilising the incredible facilities on offer, whether receiving extra coaching, practicing skills or playing with friends in their favourite sports.

The state-of-the-art resources are undoubtable. But the culture of sport as a whole is what seems to drive their fantastic results.

As she takes over what is arguably the top sports job in schools in the country from previous director of sport Dr Scott Drawer and interim DOS Graham Williams, Ella Tusler sat down with Irena and Graham to discuss the challenge ahead.

Millfield have always taken a forwarding-thinking approach to appointing their directors of sports. What do they think they saw in you and what can you bring to the job?

Irena: I'm just excited about it because there is so much experience that exists in Millfield. The scale for me, what they're trying to do is really challenging, which is what's exciting because there are all these different heads of sports, who are all geniuses in their own individual parts. They have got to find the most effective way of delivering whatever excellence means, whatever brilliance means, which doesn't always mean producing the first place win. It can sometimes be something more nuanced. And I think the complicated nature of that is a parallel to what I've had to do in the military. It's taking a bunch of different people with a lot of different opinions and trying to say, what do we collectively want to achieve? And how do we get there knowing that nothing's perfect? I think that's just a really, exciting challenge that I hope I can bring. In my previous career I had a command of 400 people in a regiment that was bomb disposal which at first I had no clue about and I had to go away and study and learn. It's the same sort of challenge and I am somebody who can say this is how I think it should effectively work or ask just a question which they already know the answer to but maybe haven't quite teased through. I think having somebody who is external is helpful. I'm hoping that my multi-sport knowledge will allow me to not favouritise one or two sports but be able to look at them all fairly and work out what they need to be the best.

Graham: Irena, her experience as a leader in an organisation, a big organisation of a lot of people was exciting. We have some unbelievably capable coaches who've worked in international sport, Youth Olympics, European Championships, national level pathways and have been in school sport for a long time and have achieved excellence in this environment as well. But we needed and we continue to need an individual who



can lead that group and challenge us and support us and inspire us. What Irena showed through her interview process was she's got that in abundance. There was no way Millfield were going to recruit on potential alone. They were always going to recruit somebody to walk in and perform the role to the highest level that needed to be done and Irena really showed that she was able to do that.

What are your mains aims, priorities and ambitions for sport at Millfield going forward?

Irena: There is such an incredible and depth of knowledge here amongst the staff and coaches at Millfield. We need to really tap into and work collaboratively as a whole department to bring the best out of every sport on offer. It's great to walk into a school with such expertise already here and we need to continue to use and prioritise that going forward.

Graham: Myself and another member of staff took over this acting position and we saw the real need to bring some collective coherence within the head of sport group. We identify something they want to continue to work on and strategise the best ways to do so. We aim too be more collegiate and collective in reviewing each other's work and recognise there's more knowledge here. We need to utilise this. I think hopefully it's put us as a senior group of sports staff in a good place to support Irena coming in.

You are obviously aware of the special place that Millfield has in competitive sport in the country. You have been the number one school in our top 200 schools list for ten of the last eleven years. How important is that to you and the school?

Irena: Why is it important? Because it's Millfield and because it'd be brilliant. Ultimately, we want to be competitive and this proves the hard work of everyone in the department and the students themselves, is paying off.

Graham: Some years we are very, very strong in some sports and we will achieve some really good outcomes. Some years we might miss the mark by a few seconds or metres or points. But we have stated previously we want to always try and be as competitive as possible. That doesn't always mean we're going to win everything, but it is always pleasing to see us being there or thereabouts in these rankings because it represents not just the outcome of sport, but hopefully the experience that students are having from a wider perspective as well.

Where did you grow up, what school did you go to and what sports did you play at school?

Irena: I am from Cheshire and I was at boarding schools growing up. I loved ball sports from quite an early age like tennis and netball. I was in a small convent where yes, I was doing all sports for the school, but it was a really small school. Then when I went to sixth form, I went to a mixed sixth form at Mount St Mary's in Sheffield, which has got quite a sporting background but didn't have very many women at the time. I wasn't a hockey player, which was their main female sport, but tennis and netball were my sort of winter and summer sports that I just loved. So that was great.

What sports have you played throughout your life and to what standard?

Irena: I was drawn to Loughborough University, got there and thought I nailed it. I was going to be a great netball player for the university. Then they said I might be looking at the fourth team. I went and started playing rugby at Loughborough and then fell in love with the game. It was a perfect mix of physicality but also strategy because you were having to really think about a game in a way that was more than the two minutes that were in front of you. It was a physiological aspect and I thought that was quite exciting. From an early age I've also been a horse rider just because that was something I grew up doing. When I started looking at careers I went and worked for a company, but I wasn't very inspired by what it gave to society and wanted to do something more. One of the principal reasons I joined the military was because I realised I could have a sporting career in the military. My first posting was in Germany so my first rugby club was Hanover Rugby Club. I started skiing while I was at university so I started doing some skiing expeditions while I was in my first few years in the army. Ten years in, I had a bit of a change with sports. I wanted to do something where I wasn't as injured. I was a prop in rugby and I was a small prop, which meant I was constantly getting hit, so I flicked over to triathlon, mainly because I really enjoyed swimming and running. I also got into a bit of water polo because it's a nice mix of rugby and swimming which is



great and then realised as I was getting a bit older that endurance became easier so I started doing more swimming. Then I did a channel relay and then lots more relays because I realised I loved it and then I did iron distances. Then I did my first marathon and thought I'll just do one. And then that became seven and I just love the running. So running and swimming I still really adore. Then in my last few years in the army, I've been able to pick back up tennis and horse riding. Sport, it's my passion, it's what I'm doing in all of my spare time now.

What was the decision-making behind starting this new profession as a director of sport?

Irena: Opportunity is really the main reason because somebody I worked with a long time ago contacted me and said you need to do this job. The school don't know it but you're perfect for it and you don't know it but you're perfect for it. At first I said it's not for me right now. Then I thought I'll just have a quick visit. My husband and I visited Millfield and we both said 'we've got to go for this.' So it was a no-brainer because I'd only heard about Millfield because of their fantastic swimming but I don't think I realised the breadth and the depth of it until I saw it myself. The depth in terms of the brilliance of the people that are on the staff but also the depth in terms of going into national governing bodies and the pathways they've fostered. Whilst that was attractive, Gavin Horgan, the headteacher at Millfield is inspirational and I was attracted to the school values, the multi-sport opportunities that really consider a student's growth not to peak during their school time, but what makes you the best sportsman or woman for your life. Does that become a sporting career? Or is it a love for sports in your personal life? At the risk of sounding like I'm on Ted Lasso, sports life teaches you teamwork. It teaches you resilience, determination and willpower. It's all the things that make you happy and successful in life.

How much has sport played a part in your personal and working life up to now?

Irena: Personally, it gives me energy. For me, it's about doing things that you don't think you can do at first. I'm increasingly drawn now to events that I almost think I can't quite do, but I'll find a way to do it. You also do it with people and get that chance to socialise and find people you've got a lot in common with. I love the team spirit of it all.

What do you think are the biggest challenges in school sport today?

Graham: Rugby has had a lot of headlines around safety and player welfare. Our rugby numbers have stayed really stable over the past four years, particularly post COVID. We had a sense that it was important to see what was going on in that sport because clearly from a media perspective, there's a lot of spotlight on technology, safety, welfare, and injury. But there seems to be a desire from our community still to engage in that sport. So the onus is on us to keep our levels of safeguarding and safety and risk within national governing body guidelines and even above that to make sure student welfare is a real priority. But we're really encouraged to see lots of boys and girls continuing to want to play rugby.

What do you say to some schools who say that exams and academia is more important that sport and should take priority?

Irena: I'm back on my sport is life again. I just think it teaches you life lessons. I mean, academia is just so narrow. It's great to combine the two. It's resilience. It's discipline. It's routine. It's what you need to have a healthy life. And it's processing time as well. Everybody will tell you that you can't sit in a room for however many hours a day without going out and doing something. And I think it's proven the mental health benefits sports can bring and that feels pertinent for our students.

You are obviously in a privileged position at Millfield when it comes to sports funding. What can you say to schools around the country that have to provide sports provision on a fraction of the resources that you have?

Graham: The facilities are great and they allow sport to happen at a certain level. The coaching at Millfield is high quality and we're passionate about being the best we can be in the area. But the concept of developing psychological skills through sport is compelling, both from a research perspective and an applied perspective, in that it can help everybody at every level. We've got some brilliant examples. Recently our





pool flooded. It was out of action for two months this last academic year. Our swimming team had to train in a local leisure centre at awkward hours and they had to fit around the local community. In that year our swimming programme produced the best results they'd had in the past ten years. It wasn't the fact that they had the best facility in the country. It is the fact they found a way to overcome their problem. It set challenges for students. They walked into the local town at an awkward time in the morning, at night to get changed and unfamiliar facilities to use an unfamiliar pool, 25 metre pool rather than 50 metre, five lanes instead of eight. More people in a lane. The coaches challenged the students to embrace that experience. Often it's the goal setting, the resilience, the decision making, the creativity, the engaging in failure and finding solutions to problems that allows students to flourish in their sport. So thinking about how you, a coach, could integrate those skills within any training session. If you're on a piece of grass anywhere in the country, you can think about how you engage young people in that aspect of their sport and that those are the bits that are typically proven to allow the best to be the best at any levels.

Irena: I was going to say that's one of the things that drew me to Millfield. It's ingrained in you to think of creative ways of doing things that I genuinely appreciate. I've got a lot of friends that work in the state sector and it isn't always possible with the curriculum they have to deliver. But I think if you can encourage some of that sense of 'how else could we do this'? I assumed before we did the sessions the other day that everybody would be only talking about winning but they were approaching success in a different way, which is hugely compelling.

Graham: Our door is always open to any coach in any part of the country at any school or club or national governing body or academy to come in and have a look. We'll learn from you and you'll learn from us. Come and have a look at our coaching sessions, come and chat with our coaches, come and learn. We'll give you session plans. We open up our facilities as much as we can to help the local community and other schools because we appreciate that, like a lot of independent schools, we do have better facilities than the state sector. And that does feel really unfair, but a lot of independent schools are working really hard to try and open up access to enable everyone to be able to use different facilities. Look for where those opportunities are elsewhere with local clubs or other schools that do have those things because they're usually willing to accommodate.

What can be done to improve sport in schools generally around the country?

Irena: I think there's something really interesting about the multi-sports aspect. I look back to my time in school, you were so channelled into one sport and I think there's something about multi sport skills which might not be different sports, but embracing the fact that you can just do different things and take different things from different sports, which is a low cost but different mindset approach to sport which I think would be hugely beneficial.

Graham: I think it's really hard. It's schools prioritising the time to do PE and to do games. You hear about national statistics where children are hardly having any time at school to do PE and games and that's where it's gone a bit wrong, I think. We are in this era of a generation that need that sport outlet in life for a whole array of reasons.