



Photo: Laszlo Geczo

SPORT ONE-ON-ONE:

Linda Djougang

By Helen Hanley

Trinity nursing student Linda Djougang's three-year journey from social tag rugby to representing Ireland at this year's Six Nations.

Linda Djougang first heard about Trinity Access from her guidance counsellor in school. She knew instantly it was something she wanted to do. However, her dream of going to Trinity almost didn't come true. Facing tough competition from the hundreds of others who apply annually to do the Trinity Access Foundation Course, Linda didn't make the initial cut of 25.

Fast forward to Leaving Cert results day. It's raining and Linda is in the bank trying to pay the enrolment fees for a Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) course. This is her plan B, not having gotten in to Trinity. But the money will take too long to transfer into the relevant account, so she'll miss the deadline.

"I remember standing outside the bank and crying, not knowing what to do next. I was thinking – this future that I'd envisioned for myself is never going to happen."

But just at that point, Linda's luck took a turn for the better. When she took out her phone, she noticed she had a missed call. She rang the number only to discover that it was Trinity Access who had been trying to ring her. Someone had dropped out of the Foundation Course and would she like to take up the place instead?

Call it serendipity, call it good things happening to good people – whatever explanation you choose, it's fair to say that since that fateful day back in 2015, Linda has never looked back.

In fact, her life story seems to be a series of unplanned-for events that have happily altered the course of her life. Take her involvement

with rugby. While she earned her first cap for Ireland in this year's 2019 Six Nations, Linda only discovered the sport in 2016.

Following the Foundation Course, Linda spent time interning at Grant Thornton. "I come from an environment where you don't see many people wearing suits and the like. Getting over that barrier where you feel more comfortable with people was a big help. I changed so much over the 10 weeks of that internship."

It's also thanks to Grant Thornton, in a way, that Linda's rugby career took off.

"When I was working there, I saw on my computer that there was a social event featuring tag rugby coming up. Someone asked me if I'd ever played tag rugby before, and I said no but I'd always loved sport growing up, so I decided to give it a go."

The game was held in Wanderers and afterwards, the women's manager for that team approached Linda.

"She asked me if I wanted to play more of a physical game – real rugby. I'd enjoyed myself at the tag, so I said yes, why not? That was really my first experience of rugby."

After playing with them for a season, Linda got a call to try out for Leinster. "I was so nervous," she says. "I remember it was the last of my summer exams and everyone was going out partying, but I couldn't go because I was training for the Leinster trials."

Leinster obviously saw what Wanderers saw in her. Linda was selected for the squad and has been part of it ever since. The downside was that she had to leave Wanderers, the club that had given her a start, as they were a division four team and she needed to mix with a more experienced side in order to develop as a player. So she joined Belvedere, which had won the All Ireland League for three years running.

"I wanted to be with the best club, and they have so many international players in their team. People said to me, 'Are you worried that you mightn't get any game time because they have so many high-calibre players?' But I thought, I'm willing to take that risk. My mother always told me that if you want to be the best, then you have to hang around with the best."

Even before the rugby, Linda's involvement with sport also came about almost by chance. When she moved to Ireland from Cameroon at the age of nine, she couldn't speak English. What ended up bridging the gap for her in those early days was the universal language of sport. Not only did it help her settle in to her new home, she also discovered – again – that she had a previously untapped sporting ability.

"A while after I arrived here, my neighbour, who was involved in athletics, asked me to try out for the shot-put. So I rested it in my shoulder, like he showed me, and threw it. He just said, 'Wow – I'm going to talk to your dad!'"

Linda ended up competing in Morton Stadium, where she won a gold medal, setting a new record into the bargain. She also went on to set up an athletics club with her friend just after she started in secondary school.

Despite her obvious sporting talent, she's not sure where it comes from. "Neither of my parents are sporty, but I was quite a tomboy growing up and played a lot of sport – especially football. Cameroon is a big footballing nation!"

Nowadays, everything revolves around rugby – and she loves it. "It plays such a big role in my life – it's all consuming. I finish lectures, go training, get home around 11pm, then repeat the same again the

next day, but I'm loving it. The rugby girls, from Ireland, Leinster and Trinity, are like my family now. We spend almost every day together, travel together, train together, talk rugby together."

The other thing competing for her attention is the course she's studying in Trinity. She's just finished her third year of General Nursing and may go on to do Midwifery.

"I always wanted to have a career where I would help people. That's something that has stayed with me since I was a child in Cameroon. My grandpa was sick and there are no nursing homes there – we take care of our family members ourselves. I enjoyed that. Also, I want to do something that gives back, because growing up, so much was given to me."

Linda is also keen to learn as much as she can about rugby, so that she can continue to improve and to achieve her dreams. "There's so much to learn. I'm learning all the time and haven't nearly reached my peak. My goal this year was to get capped for Leinster, and that happened in September. But playing for Ireland is a dream come true."

"After Six Nations last year, Adam Briggs took me aside and told me he sees me as more of a front row. But since moving into prop, there's so much technique involved, there's so much to learn that I'm enjoying the game even more because I'm learning something different."

She now plays loose and tighthead for Ireland and earned two caps in this year's Six Nations tournament, against England and Scotland. Linda was joined on the squad by fellow Trinity Rugby and Ulster player Kathryn Dane.

As for the future, she hopes to remain part of the Ireland set-up. "I definitely want to stay in the squad, improving my game and hopefully qualifying for the World Cup – that would be a dream come true. Not a lot of people have that opportunity, so that's a big goal I'm setting for myself."



Linda Djougang

Photo: Cathal Noonan

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Helen Hanley B.A. (1995) is a communications professional with a particular interest in sport.