

Converting the bad days to good: Tackling a farming future

Scottish rugby player Stafford McDowall has thrown his not insignificant 6ft 4 inches might behind Farmstrong Scotland, the wellbeing movement for farmers and crofters.

For farming families one of the most difficult conversations can be succession. Rugby player Stafford McDowall says it's a weight off his mind to already have had that conversation.

He admires his father, Fergus McDowall, for always being upfront that running a dairy farm was "his dream" and putting no pressure on his son to follow in his footsteps.

Stafford had his name down to study agriculture at Newcastle University as an 18-year-old, but he deferred the place while he tried to break into the professional rugby ranks, juggling training sessions with farm jobs. The chance to make rugby his livelihood did come knocking during that gap year out and Stafford headed for the bright lights of Glasgow and a life away from the family farm which stands a stone's throw from the Irish Sea at Kirkcudbright, in Dumfries and Galloway.

Now, whenever he gets some time off, Stafford enjoys returning home to the farm and has started studying for a business management qualification, which he hopes will be useful in the long-term when his playing career is over, and he comes home to take over the reins. Of course, with luck on his side, that won't be for

a long while yet. After all, Stafford is still only 26 and is playing the best rugby of his life as a back in the Glasgow Warriors squad.

Stafford has recently become engaged to his fiancé Lauren (who also grew up in the countryside) and says keeping in the loop with what's happening at home on the farm is very important tool that keeps his mental health on track.

"I'm really happy to be supporting Farmstrong," said Stafford. "That year after leaving school, when I was 18, is probably the longest spell I've spent working on the farm and it made me realise what a lonely job farming can be.

Like a lot of farmers, I'm not great at sharing my feelings and I really admire the way Farmstrong is encouraging people that it's ok to open up and talk about how they are doing. It's so important that there is help there for people who need it.

"I'm lucky that eventually I have come around by myself to the idea that I want to take over the farm. Dad's been great at not lumping pressure on. He's not going to be looking over his shoulder at me. He says once it's handed over it will be your thing to take on."

The McDowall's run over 1,000 Holstein milkers, with their 24-a-side swing-over parlour in use 18 hours a day. Milk is sold to Muller Wiseman Dairies. Stafford is aware that for many farmers, who perhaps haven't had the opportunity to live away from the family farm, that rather than something to look forward to taking on the mantle can bring about a lot of added stress and family tensions.

He grew up with a strong family work ethic, with dad on the farm, mum Tina working as a nurse and three older sisters, Katrina, Charlotte and Rebecca, who have all ploughed their own furrow with their careers. Katrina studied agriculture and was very hands-on at the McDowall family farm, though is now farming near Castle Douglas with her husband.

"My route back to the farm will not be a normal transition; working at home and gradually taking on more responsibility," reflects Stafford.

"But I do know that rugby and farming have a lot in common such as hard work and resilience.

My practical knowledge is fairly limited, but I hope I'll make up for it in enthusiasm.



Having moved away from the farm to the city it's only now really that I appreciate what a wonderful place to grow up it was. One of the big problems is staffing; finding people who want to work with dairy cows," says Stafford. "I imagine by the time I come home it will be even more difficult."

The centre made his Scotland debut in a Rugby World Cup warm-up match against Italy in 2023 and, in January of this year, he was selected for the 2024 Guinness Six Nations squad, making his Six Nations debut against Ireland.

He has recently returned home from a holiday, where he proposed to Lauren, who is studying for a Master's in nutrition. Their break came at the end of Stafford's first summer tour with the national team. One highlight was being named as co-captain for Scotland's opening match of this Skyscanner Americas tour, scoring a first international try in the win over Canada in Ottawa.

The icing on the cake for Stafford was that his father took a rare break from the farm to see him in action.

"Like all farmers, he didn't want to be away for long, but stayed for about three days," recalls Stafford, who is the latest guest on Farmstrong's podcast Blether Together. "It's great to look up at the stands and see your family there."

Fergus himself played rugby at top amateur level and was Stafford's coach until he turned 16 and got a scholarship to Merchiston in Edinburgh.

Driving him all over the country for training sessions and matches - then getting up at 5am the next morning for milking - was a way of life for Fergus during those early years of his son's rugby career.

To be made co-captain on only his third Scotland appearance was a huge honour. He led the side out alongside Edinburgh flanker Luke Crosbie.

This year's whirlwind summer is in stark contrast to the position Stafford was in just a year ago, when he was sat down by Glasgow Warriors managing director Al Kellock and told an extension to his expiring contract was unlikely.

"It looked like I'd be coming home to the farm earlier than I'd expected," recalls Stafford.

Competition from more established centre players meant he spent many weeks not being picked to play; creating a downward spiral in that because he wasn't seen on the pitch he then stood less chance of being picked.

"It was a tough time," recalls Stafford. I was lucky that it was around this time that I met Lauren, so had somebody to talk to.

Taking the dog for a walk, getting out of the flat, was also important. When you are lucky enough to play rugby for a living it feels bad complaining when the tough times come. But when all you want to be doing is playing it can be really difficult."

Stafford says it's only human nature that fans don't think about anything else than the 23 players that get to run out in each match.

"The fact is there will have been 46 or 50 guys training for the whole week and then when you don't get to pull on a jersey it's hard.

I went through four or five months not getting to play - but still going through the same tough training regime."

Work with sports psychologists, putting emphasis on being mentally strong as well as physically at the top of his game, has helped Stafford work on his mindset as well as - in common with Farmstrong - overall wellbeing.

Sports psychologists like to steer players away from superstitions, but he has held on to one.

"I always have the same meal, carbonara, before a match," reveals Stafford, adding that his wife-to-be makes one of the very best.



CONNECT

KEEP LEARNING

BE ACTIVE

Trio & Tested: Three things Stafford McDowall does to boost his wellbeing:

- Taking his dog for a walk: getting out of his Glasgow flat for fresh air is important. While Stafford has no shortage of exercise with his intensive training regime, he realises simply getting outside is good for his wellbeing.
- Studying: Glasgow Warriors encourages players to keep learning and Stafford has enrolled on a business management course which he hopes will prove useful when he takes over the family farm.
- Remembering the simple things: Meeting up with his mates for a coffee and talking about all sorts of things - not just rugby - is something Stafford tries to make time for.

Farmstrong Scotland Supporters

