

Fitzpatrick poised to flourish with Toulouse in Top Eight

PAULA Fitzpatrick is already enjoying the challenge of playing Top Eight rugby in France this season and is making quite an impression with new side Toulouse.

By Stephen Leonard
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The former St Mary's College player, along with fellow Ireland international Heather O'Brien, recently made the move and helped their new side to stunning victory over reigning champions Montpellier in their opening match of the new season.

And while it was followed up with a 25-8 point loss to Lille on Sunday, Fitzpatrick has enjoyed her start with the newly-promoted French side.

Speaking about this major career step and their baptism of fire against Montpellier, Fitzpatrick told *The Echo* "We weren't sure if we would play having only arrived the week before and also having seen the standard of players at training, but we

were lucky enough to get a run out.

"Montpellier are the French champions for the last three years running and also haven't been beaten at home in three years so for a team that has just been promoted into the Top 8 to achieve that with a 22-15 victory was a great experience to be part of.

"The standard of rugby here is very high and also it's a different style of rugby than back at home.

"The French are just obsessed with keeping the ball alive 'garder le ballon en vie' so you are very much encouraged to stay on your feet and offload whenever possible which makes for exciting rugby" she explained.

Fitzpatrick who has enjoyed Six Nations Championship success with Ireland, believes making the move to France will help improve her as a player and benefit her international career.

"Naturally it was a big decision to leave work, my business STRIVE Sport Science and my club St. Mary's in Ireland" said

Fitzpatrick.

"The main motivation for making the move was to improve as a rugby player.

"With the Women's World Cup just around the corner in 2017, I wanted as much time to devote to training as possible and also wanted to try out a different style of rugby in France.

"I've no doubt the move will stand to me as a player.

"As well as training at a high standard with really talented and skillful players on the women's team in Stade Toulousain we are also getting the opportunity to mix in with the men's youth academy teams for more specific individual line out skills which is fantastic to improve our speed, strength and power.

"The Irish and Stade Toulousain management teams have both been fantastic about accommodating us.

"Through their advice and reassurance they've helped us to ensure we get the best out of the French experience while also maintaining the focus with Ireland.



Former St Mary's College flanker Paula Fitzpatrick has joined Toulouse and (inset) in action for the French club

"Ireland is the priority and the desire to improve as Irish internationals was the motivation for making the move to France. That objective remains the same.

"We are still under the supervision of the Irish

strength and conditioning programme and are in regular contact with management at home so it's a very structured set up.

"Yes it will involve more travel than usual to make it home for Irish camps, but having more time to

concentrate on training and skill development will be a huge advantage" she stressed.