

Vioreanu just what the doctor ordered

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Last season, in his first year playing in Ireland, Mihai Vioreanu took a leap into the unknown. A chance meeting in Dublin, between the then Romanian full back and their team liason officer, Kevin Fitzpatrick, flicked on a light in heads up in the Dublin mountain foothills.

Fitzpatrick's club, DLSP, needed a strike runner and they made a convincing case to the international. Vioreanu, a qualified doctor, looked at his professional and rugby careers and felt a move to Dublin was a step forward. DLSP had their man.

A season and a half later and the 27-year-old continues to thrive and warm to the clubby set-up at Kilternan. Looking towards exams in January that will qualify him to practice medicine in Ireland and blazing a trail of five tries from five matches in the All Ireland League, Vioreanu's first season as DLSP's top league try-scorer is on course to evolve into the AIL's top scorer in his second season.

Injured for his side's third match against Shannon, the only game so far in which DLSP have not scored a try, Vioreanu touched down twice against Lansdowne, once against Cork Constitution and Dungannon and scored again last weekend against Young Munster. Only Terenure front row Cormac Egan has been living with that scoring pace.

"I was playing in a World Cup qualification match for Romania in Dublin and Kevin (Fitzpatrick) was our liason officer," he says. "That's how DLSP found out about me. They contacted me while I was still playing in Strasbourg where I'd been for about six months. I was happy to come and I still am - with Irish rugby and Irish society. The new coach (Paddy Stewart) has given us second wings. His game plan is very good. We have tried to increase our discipline but it is still an open game and based on our back line. I like that."

Vioreanu, who grew up two hours north of Bucharest in Transylvania's Brasov, took up rugby at nine, five years before the fall of dictator Nicolae Ceausescu. By the time he was 14 years old, the beginnings of a revolution had begun. No one knows exactly how many died in Brasov, or how many disappeared, but the rebellion there was brutally crushed.

By 1987, Vioreanu was watching the execution of Ceausescu and his wife Elena on Romanian television. Two years later, the then captain of the national rugby team Florica Murariu and other national players had also been killed in cross-fire. Rugby remained with him but in the context of Romania's bloody rebirth almost everyone was a casualty.

"My neighbour in Braslov was a rugby coach. So it really happened by chance that I played the game. I liked athletics as well, the 400 metres. But I consider myself lucky that he injected me with the rugby virus," he says.

A bright student, Vioreanu travelled to Timisoara to study medicine, his rugby easily keeping pace with his academic curve. After the revolution, French clubs came in and cherry-picked the best. Vioreanu left too but his ties remained strong.

"I think I've played for Romania now 20 or 22 times," he says "For the recent match against England (134-0), there was a conflict between the French-based professionals and the management. Most of them didn't play. It was also a conflict for me and I didn't play. The players were right. All they were looking for was medical insurance. There were no contracts so they would have been taking a career risk.

"When you are asked to play for your country it's very hard to refuse but I had to. I think I'll be asked to play again and I think there is a possibility for Romania to play in the next World Cup."

From full back last year to the wing this year, it is difficult to see Vioreanu not casting his net wider at the end of the season. The flank has given him more space, made it a little easier to hit the gain-lines without being picked up. The switch has worked.

"I'm better on the wing," he says. "Full back is well marked. I prefer the wing and coming in from the blind-side, especially playing with the back line in DLSP. The other boys create space for me."

If the two tries against Ireland in 1998, when Fitzpatrick and DLSP first saw him play, didn't broadly convince, then his impact in the AIL has. UCD cast their eye in his direction during the summer. Even the Mater Hospital have sniffed out his talents to face Beaumont in the Hospital's Cup on December 21st.

The leap of faith is paying off.

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