

INTERVIEW

By Mark Gallagher



# 'We lived in fear every night that they would come for us'

## Khan's amazing journey from Direct provision to Ireland's cricket academy

ANY knock on the door was terrifying. Even the lights of approaching cars would make their hearts skip a beat or two. Zubair Hasan Khan remembers that his parents were sick with worry. All they had as a reference point was their past life, the one they thought they had left behind, when families could be taken in the middle of the night.

So, of course, they believed the same thing could happen here.

Two letters had arrived for the Khan family at the Direct Provision Centre on the Kinsale Road that week. After being on Cricket Ireland's radar for some time, one had informed Zubair he had been selected for the emerging academy in Dublin. The other told the family that their application for International Protection had been unsuccessful and a deportation order had been issued. Talk about contrasting emotions.

'It was so weird. On the one hand, we lived this fear every night that someone was going to come for us in the middle of the night and take us away, deport us, and on the other hand, I had this invitation to Cricket Ireland's academy, which is all I ever wanted,' he recalls now of that strange time.

Khan has just finished his shift as a security guard in Penneys in Cork city. He's 21 now, one of the brightest stars in the interprovincial campaign of Munster Reds and someone who is doing everything he can to represent Ireland in cricket at some point in the future. And he still gets emotional when he thinks of the public campaign in his adopted city that ensured then-Minister for Justice Charlie Flanagan revoked the deportation order for him and his family.

Cork Harlequins, the nearby cricket club that has become such a social outlet for many asylum-seekers in the Direct Provision Centre, joined forces with UCC, where Zubair's oldest brother was studying computer science, and Coláiste Eamann Rís in Cork City and the Edmund Rice Trust to bring public pressure to bear and reverse the original decision to refuse International Protection.

Khan's parents, Mubeen and Hina, settled in Saudi Arabia in 1982, having fled persecution in Pakistan. And they had made a nice life for themselves in the Desert Kingdom, with Mubeen running a drapery business. However, things changed in 2015 when King Salman came to power and the crown prince Muhammad Bin Salman introduced new tax laws, which saw foreign workers paying a rate from July 2017 that would increase by 100 per cent annually until 2020. In order to pay this, Khan and his siblings would have to drop out of school. And, if

they couldn't pay, the family faced deportation to Pakistan. So, they fled – for a second time, ending up in Cork.

'I knew nothing about Ireland, couldn't even pick it out on a map,' Khan remembers of that time. 'And I didn't have a word of English, couldn't speak it for three or six months.' But what he did have was cricket. Khan is obsessed by the game and considers his namesake, Imran Khan, his hero. And the accommodation centre that the family ended up was conveniently right next to Cork Harlequins.

'Our club is based near the Direct Provision

**RIISING STAR:** Zubair Hasan Khan at the Cricket Ireland Academy

Centre, beside the Kinsale Road roundabout, and a lot of them would come here and play a bit of cricket, try out for the club,' says Ted Williamson of Cork

**I knew nothing about Ireland. I couldn't even have picked it out on a map**

Harlequins, who has been Khan's club coach for a few years.

'So, there would be a lot of asylum-seekers down at our club, from the likes of Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh, but I suppose Zubair was one who stood out.

'His whole life revolves around cricket. He is passionate about it, gives everything to it and he works very hard at it. Zubair started as a bowler, a fast bowler, and he would have been at the end in the batting order, but he has worked so hard at improving that aspect of his game that he has moved up to the middle of the order.'

Following the reversal of the deportation order, Khan and his

family can stay in Ireland, but the process towards naturalisation and citizenship remains a long one. As things stand, Zubair won't get his Irish passport until 2027, when he will be 24 years of age.

It means he is still considered an overseas player in the domestic game – for Munster Reds and Harlequins. But, more than that, it also means he can't spend more than 70 days outside the country in the preceding five years.

For someone who is determined to improve his game, to spend his winter working on his game, that can prove problematic.

In the past couple of years, Khan has gone to Dubai and Pakistan respectively, in an effort to get better at his game. However, he always had to cut his training camps short, as he had to come back to Ireland within 70 days.

Two years ago, he went to a camp in Dubai. He felt himself getting sharper with every session. Before he knew it, though, it was time to go back to Ireland.

Khan had been enrolled in a sports & leisure course in MTU Cork, but he decided to defer his course and focus all his energies in following his cricket dream and representing Ireland.

That is why he went to Dubai. And why he ended up in Lahore in Pakistan in December and January just gone. All the money

he had saved from his security job went into the trip and hiring an individual coach in Zain-Ul Abidin, a former Pakistani international and coach with Karachi Kings in the PSL.

'I spent 85,000 rupees for the individual coaching course, but it was worth it. I picked up a lot of small things that have improved my game so much.

'In my first game back in Ireland, I took four wickets and then took

**If he can get a consistent few years, who knows where he'll end up**

four wickets in my next game. My game had come on so much, it was just a pity that I couldn't have stayed there longer.'

It is Khan's dream to play cricket for Ireland. From not being able to pick the country out on a map before he and his family landed in Cork, he is now so immersed in the Rebel City that he peppers a 45-minute conversation with plenty



**REBEL SWAGGER:** Khan bowling for Cork Harlequins in the All-Ireland T20 Cusp Final and (above) Munster Reds coach Ted Williamson

tape is stymieing his sporting potential, and if he was able to spend longer out of the country in the winter, he would be an even better player. 'I can only stay out of the country for two months, so that is just the amount of time that I can get coaching. If I had an Irish passport, I could spend longer out of the country and become an even better player.'

Khan has been in Cork for seven years now and it has left a trace on his accent. For a time, such was his passion for cricket, he was double-jobbing – for Tereure in Dublin and Harlequins down in Cork. That was before the rules were changed and he had to concentrate on one team. And he was part of the Quins team under Williamson that contested their first All-Ireland final two years ago – in the T20 championship.

Williamson has seen a lot of talented cricketers from other parts of the world coming through the club, and he believes that it is only a matter of time before someone who had been under International Protection will end up representing Ireland. Khan is determined that it will be him.

'He's obsessed with cricket, it is all about cricket, cricket, cricket for him,' Williamson added.

'For someone that committed and passionate about the game, you want to see do well.'

Such is Khan's obsession with cricket, it was widely reported that he was watching old games on YouTube on the day the news came through that Flanagan had revoked the deportation order.

It is the sort of vignette that will become a huge part of the story should Khan go on to play for Ireland.

And at a time when immigration has become such a hot topic in the country, and some are trying to use it as an issue to pit people against one another, it is heartening to hear of how one asylum-seeker holds the ambition of representing the country.

'He has been on Cricket Ireland's radar for a while, and if he can get a consistent few years under his belt, who knows where he could end up?' Williamson said.

For now, Khan is making a name for himself with Munster Reds. He will be part of the team travelling to Stormont this week for two games against Northern Knights. It is part of a developing domestic scene for the game.

As attention turns to the T20 World Cup across the Atlantic – with Khan particularly looking forward to Ireland's group game with Pakistan – the game here continues apace.

And Khan will be one of the best stories. But he is determined to have the most apt of endings.

'I just love the game and watch cricket whenever I can.

'And my dream is to wear the green jersey and represent Ireland, that is all I want to do. And it is what I will do.'

## Nadal may be calling a halt to his retirement

TENNIS

By Sam Lovett

RAFAEL NADAL has revealed this year's French Open may not be his last after all.

The 14-time Roland Garros champion had previously said he expects to retire after the current season.

But Nadal, 37, performed something of a volte-face in Paris yesterday by not ruling out a return.

The Spaniard said: 'In terms of that's going to be my last Roland Garros, it's a long answer, but I think I need to answer that because we're going to avoid future questions since the beginning – so I'm going to do it.'

'As I said, it's a big, big chance that it's going to be my last Roland Garros, but if I have to tell you it's 100 per cent my last Roland Garros, sorry, but I will not, because I cannot predict what's going on. I hope you understand. 'I have been going through



**IN TWO MINDS:** Rafael Nadal

a long process of recovery with a very difficult injury, almost two years of suffering, a recovery process that seems like I feel better now.

'I am not a guy that reacts because I lost there or I lost in the other place, no? I react about my personal feelings, and my personal feelings are better now than one month and a half ago.

'In some way I don't want to close, 100 per cent, the door, because of a very simple thing.

'First thing, I am enjoying playing tennis. Second thing, I am travelling with the family. They are enjoying and I am enjoying sharing all this process with them.

'And, the third thing, I was not able to explore yet the proper way how I will be able to play in more or less healthy conditions, playing without limitation.

'So, give me some time. Maybe in one month and a half I say, "OK it's enough, I can't keep going", but today in some way I cannot guarantee that's going to be the last one. But of course it's a big chance.'

Nadal, unseeded this year for the first time, faces world No 4 Alexander Zverev in the first round tomorrow.