

## SOCCER: FOCUS ON THE FANS THE SCOTTISH MEDIA WOULD LIKE TO FORGET

# The tartan in the tricolour

With the 1994 World Cup qualifying campaign now a third of the way completed, the Republic of Ireland are sitting pretty at the top of Group Three and a flattering 1/8 on to take their place among the 24 finalists for the second successive tournament.

One of the features of Euro '88 and Italia '90 was the amazing sight of the legions of Jack's Army. Like many of the players themselves, more than few of the battalions that saw action in Sardinia and Sicily were exiles. They did a goodwill job on behalf of Bord Fáilte that made President Robinson in a community centre seem like Norman Tebbit at a Euro seminar.

Last month the hosts of Italia '90, who themselves trembled under the Bonner high-ball tactic in the quarter-final and were duly grateful to get out from under it, played Scotland at Ibrox Park.

In an heroic failure so typical of Scottish football on the big occasion the Scots were desperately unlucky only to draw with Italy. The prospects of them reaching America are now slim, and the antics of their gregarious fans will be a colourful omission from the proceedings Stateside in 18 months.

## Metaphor

While the Scottish media understandably got behind their team to the point of overkill, the "fans-with-typewriters" drew a discreet veil over those who live amongst them, but who are supporters of another team. The treatment in the Scottish media of the Irish team and of the Irish supporters in Scotland is a poignant metaphor for the level of acceptance of the Irish community in modern Scotland.

It is perhaps more appropriate than it first may appear that a subject of such gravity should be discussed within the context of the magnificent triviality of a soccer competition. For it is within Association Football's greatest prize that the ethnic joins of the "United Kingdom's" unitary state start to show... even Northern Ireland is granted the status of a nation!

FIFA is one of the few international organisations that recognises Scotland as a separate nation and not merely a collection of local authorities hundreds of miles north of the Thames. It is only on the turfed international stage of the World Cup that Scotland is a full member of the global village.

Hardly surprising, then, that the failures, farces and the occasional victory against the odds of Scottish teams over the last six World Cup finals have sometimes been seen as a parody of the boom/slump cycle of modern Scottish self-esteem.

## Celtic link

Football rivalry and expressions of ethnic identity in a Glaswegian context are, for the most part, inseparable. The Irish community, historically, has been associated with Celtic Football Club in the city's East End. The Irishness of Celtic and many of its supporters has never been lost on the open-minded and intelligent Scottish commentator. Journalist William McIlvanney stated during Celtic's centenary year that he found it remarkable that a community had taken the most unpredictably fluid ball game in the world to make sense of itself.

Moreover, it is received wisdom amongst the Parkhead faithful that the treatment of Celtic stars at the hands of Scottish team selectors mirrored their own experience in terms of job and promotion opportunities.

The most famously successful Celtic team to date, the 1967 Lisbon Lions, were all eligible to play for Scotland, but they had a pitifully small collection of



CLASH OF THE CELTS: Ronnie Whelan and Maurice Johnston are caught ball watching during the 1987 European Championship qualifying match at Hampden Park, which the Republic won 1-0. It was the last time the two sides met.

The Republic of Ireland's soccer bandwagon continues apace to almost universal acclaim, but what of the Irish in Scotland? PHIL MacGIOLLABHAIN examines the plight of an isolated battalion of Jack's Army.

Scottish caps among them by the end of their careers. Inferior, sometimes mediocre Rangers players, were favoured over those from the Scottish champions who reigned as kings of Europe in the late sixties.

It was an instinctively understood code for the sense of exclusion that generations of Irish Glaswegians learned that the major institutions in the land of their birth held them in contempt.

Glasgow Celtic is probably the most visibly potent symbol of Glasgow's Irish heritage. Even the most blinkered would find it difficult to define the ethos of the Parkhead terracing as anything other than an expression of expatriate Irishness adapted to local conditions. Among their Glasgow-based supporters can be found people who followed the Republic's international team long before it was quite as fashionable as it is now with the trendy Mexican-wave Lansdowne set.

The unique support which the "Tic" attracts is about the roots and traditions of being Irish in Glasgow, and also about being at the bottom of the economic pile in the city.

The discriminating treatment meted out by the Scottish media to team and supporters alike is an

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emblematic tale of modern Scotland and its live prejudices. Some of the best chippies in Glasgow proudly sport window stickers that show a crossed Saltire and an Italian tricolour. Everyone, it would seem, agrees that this sort of multi-culturalism benefits the whole country.

To put the question of whether or not some of the best pubs in Glasgow be allowed to display the Scottish flag and a different tricolour would be to disclose an active ignorance of the street culture of Glasgow. Even the casual observer knows that such a seemingly harmless proposition would be foolhardiness in Ulster's cultural twin.

## Good taste

The Italian tricolour is the flag of a nation that contains quite a few Catholics; this doesn't seem to break anyone's rules about good taste and community harmony. It would appear that some tricolours — and some Catholics — are more acceptable in Scotland than others.

When Italy won the World Cup in 1982, George Square was swamped by deliriously happy Italians, many of them Glaswegians. The city centre was awash with green, white and red flags. I cannot recall any comments or inferences in the press or on television that considered this demonstration of expatriatism to be offensive to the wider community. Television had nice end-of-news-bulletin pieces shot in packed Italian restaurants. There would be a chap with a Rab C Nesbitt blás and a name like Giovanni. After Pakkie saved that penalty in Genoa there was no similar coverage of similarly gruff Glaswegians called Liam or Brendan.

There wasn't any outburst that the Italians didn't belong in our city, or that it wasn't their city too. No one appeared to feel that they were a threat, or felt insulted or

the net but was the victim of a wrong offside decision, or that Niall Quinn was straight through on the goalkeeper and should have converted a clear scoring chance.

Given that the Irish team's supporters in Scotland easily constituted the largest group of followers next to Scotland itself, then the threadbare coverage — two column inches in The Herald — is even more glaring.

During the last World Cup finals, when Ireland were still in the competition a week after Scotland's exit, Scottish sports journalists invented a new World Cup game of trying to outdo each other in their criticisms of the Irish style of play and the FAI's use of the FIFA qualification rules.

The fact that Jack's team had quite a few Will Geese in it seemed to unduly preoccupy quite a few of the Scottish press corps. Their persistent inference was: "How can you be Irish, play for the Republic, if you weren't born there?"

## Accents

The Irish team, were described by one columnist as being "...a weird collection of accents...". The same pundit conveniently forgot that the Scottish captain was born in Sweden and reared in South Africa.

At present it would appear that the Scottish media seemed determined then not to yield to the central reality that many people live their lives by in this city — you can be Glaswegian and Irish.

The media strategy of ignoring the huge army of armchair Republic of Ireland fans in the West of Scotland is faring better in this World Cup competition than the tactics of the Scottish team. In starving Jack's Army of the oxygen of public acclaim they are, in effect, keeping the residual Irishness of many in this part of Britain successfully under wraps.

What's certain is that Ireland's world-beating Glaswegians will be able, if they wish, to check through immigration in the USA in 1994 with an Irish passport.

Players like Ray Houghton, Owen Coyle, Kieron Brady, Bernie Slaven and Tommy Coyne — all born in Scotland, all Irish internationals — telescope the issue that the Scottish sports media seems determined to suppress: that you can be born and reared in Scotland (or anywhere else for that matter) and have an Irish identity, an Irish consciousness and look at the world as an Irish person.

## Blind spot

Jack's lads will be there as citizens, not subjects, and perhaps subjection is at the heart of the Scottish media's blind spot to the Irish. Perhaps the core of the problem is that Scotland's lads, though recognised by soccer's United Nations, won't be able to pay in the currency required at the airport. Immigration will get no passports to give them a clue who this team represent, only the Scottish shell suits to remind the world that this isn't the England 'B' squad.

If the media's response to Republic of Ireland fans in Scotland is a valid metaphor of the extent to which the community isn't accepted on its own terms, then the Scottish media's morbid fascination with their own team's

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fortunes is an equally telling indicator of Scotland as a nation.

The pilgrim's progress of Scottish teams in international soccer could have been the fancy of a playwright's pen as a parody of the nation's swaggering, kilted inferiority complex, forever fixated on England.

It is truly ironic that the London media coverage of the last World Cup provided Scots with a *bête noir* par excellence. Jimmy Hill, who now features on a television advertisement in Scotland that invokes Scottish patriotism, is the man all true Scots love to hate.



Ray Houghton: Glasgow-born, but his allegiance lies with the Republic of Ireland.

There was, briefly, a petition raised against him and the entire English press tribe during the bit of the World Cup that Scotland is allowed to play in.

The legality of Irish citizenship only serves to heighten the unreality of pretending that the Irish in Scotland don't exist. In fact this recognition is merely what Irish people all over the world expect as their right in the many cities to which they have contributed, from Boston to Buenos Aires.

Despite the Scottish team's almost certain absence from the serious bit of the World Cup, some of Scotland's Fourth Estate will find themselves in a land where it allows its people to draw on their heritage. Perhaps Scottish sports journalists, bereft of their team to talk to, will employ some of their time musing on a conundrum of their own cultural myopia: if there are Irish New Yorkers why aren't there any Irish Glaswegians?

There are, of course, quite a lot of us, and the most recent "tale of two goalless draws" does not make many in this community sanguine that our media house arrest will be lifted in time for the finals.



IF THE CAP FITS: Members of the Glasgow-based Sons of Donegal Celtic Supporters' Club, a name which states clearly and proudly which side of the water its allegiance

lies. The roots of the first-, second- and third-generation Irish in Glasgow lie almost exclusively in Tir Conaill: indeed, Ray Houghton's father is from Buncrana.