

## SOCCER

# Stop the flow of the ones that got away

There are those who claim that the Football Association of Ireland's initials should stand for Find An Irishman, but is the search for new talent as thorough as it could be?

PHIL MacGIOLLABHAIN has his doubts.

match day is that, if you can suspend thought about baseball, football and time zones, there isn't that much different between these watering holes and the proud sporting immigrant Irishness that they represent.

There is one major difference, though. It's acceptable in America to be Irish. In a land of huddled minorities made good it's as American as the Superbowl to wear your roots on your sleeve. Sporting manifestations of Irishness in British soccer have largely been understated, with one notable exception. Glasgow Celtic survives as a tattered icon of Irishness for Glasgow's working class, but it remains a largely under-the-counter product. Brought out of its plain brown wrapper every match day. The club itself remains at best hesitant in its espousal of Celtic's living Irish roots.

I recently spoke to Joe McGrath, the amiable and able director of coaching for the FAI. It became clear, even over the phone, that it was one soccer addict speaking to another.

His is the first full-time appointment of its kind for the FAI, and living proof that the FAI realise that they need to plan for the future. When asked how he and his colleagues find out about promising young lads in Britain who might declare for the Republic, he told me that Britain was a country of two halves.

The network of scouts in England was "very good", but that he got "hardly anything at all from Scotland". I asked him to think back over the last ten years, and how the following would have looked in a green shirt: Frank MacAvennie, Joe Miller, Charlie Nicholas...

"Stop!" he pleaded, "you'll make me cry". All of these current Celtic players would have qualified

under the present FIFA rules to play for the Republic. All of them played for Scotland at youth level and above, thus disqualifying themselves. Whether or not they would have opted for Ireland is a moot point: what isn't in doubt is that no-one asked them in the first place.

I tortured Joe further. I asked him to cast his mind back to the late sixties: Frank Gray, Eddie Gray... "Stop! Stop!" The point was cruelly made, but there was a wealth of soccer talent that, in years gone by, could have worn the green for the Republic.

Not all would have taken that step, but some would have. The prospect of Liam Brady providing the ammunition in the box for the

accepted by soccer watchers that his time at Arsenal wasn't fruitful for him or the club, yet he received 14 caps while at Highbury.

Charlie's career is more behind him than in front of him now, but one thing's for sure in his native Glasgow, where kids still play football in the street just for the joy of it: there's another Nicholas out there and, like Charlie, he might qualify for the wearing of the green.

This is based on the reasonable assumption that there must be thousands of youngsters in the soccer-daft West of Scotland with at least one Irish grandparent, and amongst those thousands will be a small but significant vein of natural soccer brilliance.

In the past the boys of this community were not given the opportunity to be part of Ireland's soccer plans. Presently it's only if they slip through the SFA net at youth level that they will remain eligible for their family tree to be shaken by Jack Charlton.

Celtic's role is, of course, crucial to whether or not Ireland gets back one of its own.

The same day I had the craic with Master McGrath I spoke to John Kelman, Celtic's chief scout.

John Kelman thought that "this Irish grandparent thing is a bit ridiculous, isn't it?"

I then told him that three of his young professionals currently playing in the reserves qualified for the Republic, as did five of his apprentices.

None of the latter had played for Scotland at a level that would rule them out, while some had been overlooked completely. One lad in particular, Kelman admitted, was "Ireland daft!" Did he ever contact the FAI? No, but if the FAI wanted to contact Celtic, then of course they were free to do so.

What did animate Mr. Kelman

‘This Irish grandparent thing is a bit ridiculous, isn't it?’

young Nicholas is one that arguably would have put the Republic into the top ten of world soccer a decade before Italia '90.

That, of course, didn't happen. Charlie played in the dark blue of Scotland, but that too tells its own tale. The best part of Nicholas' career was when he was at Parkhead in the early eighties. He was easily the most instinctive player to wear the hoops since Kenny Dalglish. During his time at Celtic he received six full caps with Scotland, scant reward for a player of his ability. It is generally



Joe McGrath: the man entrusted with bringing young Irish talent through to senior international level.

about nationality issues in International football was a young midfielder at Parkhead, Scott Ferguson, who could play for Canada. "He was born in Toronto but he's very Scottish, and he might be lost to Scotland if they aren't careful," confided Celtic's chief scout. He then said that "the nationality thing is never in our thoughts, it came as a big surprise to us about Tommy Coyne: no one here thought that Tommy was Irish...."

One can't help but harbour the suspicion that, in the West of Scotland, there are too many potential Tommy Coyne's being disallowed from representing their country because they were pushed into a Scotland jersey as boys.

## Burst with pride

Many of them would have burst with pride in an Irish jersey. At present the youth of this community are denied representation on the sports field in the same way that their parents are denied voting representation back home.

To build on the success that Jack and the lads have brought, the next generation will have to be won. What we teach our youngsters and how we teach them will be vital.

The big boys of world football, the Dutch for example, have scores of youth coaches who work full-time at developing the skills of the next generation of Gullits and Van Bastens. Joe McGrath recently returned from Holland and he has set up schools of excellence all over Ireland, especially designed to develop and encourage the soccer skills of small boys before they are submerged in the stampede of competitive 11-a-side games. Before win-at-all-costs coaches instil the heresy that brawn is more important than skill.

It was heartening to hear McGrath embrace the vision of Ireland producing tiny total footballers in a few years' time. There remain, however, gaps on the horizon for the Wild Geese. If Ireland is to compete at the top flight, then the FAI will have to think big and plan big.

## Extend the network

It isn't, of course, beyond the wit and the resources of the FAI to extend the scouting network to this part of Ireland's playing field, with regular soccer summer schools back home for promising youngsters. Young players already in the professional set-up are spotted by current Irish internationals. The deficiency with this

is that by the time they are coming to the attention of top-flight professionals, they may have already been fielded in an English, Scottish or Welsh strip for the want of an opportunity to play in an Irish one.

It would seem that the scouting must start at an earlier level and be more widespread.

It's often said by international managers that you can't go out and buy players like a club manager to strengthen the team. The Irish lads from Britain represent just such an opportunity for the Irish team.

A significant trickle of Wild Geese helped build Jack's fighting machine. Perhaps now it's time to engineer a torrent in the 21st century that can sweep away the opposition and create a wave of self-belief through our communities that they too are part of things.

The FAI can be the centrifugal force binding everything together. Certainly Joe McGrath embraced the reality that the Irishness of a second-generation player could yield tangible benefits on the playing field for Ireland. For McGrath mere qualification for the Republic wasn't enough: the lad had to want to play for Ireland, and for the right reasons.

## Commitment

In an age when personal terms and agents' fees make more headlines than headers, McGrath firmly believes that "playing for the jersey" still counts and that's what he is looking for in any lad from Britain declaring for the Republic. McGrath, for one, has no difficulty in recognising that they are as Irish as the jersey they are playing for.

"If I were to emigrate to Britain would my kids, if they were born in Britain, be any less Irish than me? Of course they wouldn't!"

The British FAs will, of course, view such a youth policy here in Britain as a threat and an intrusion, but in the end it's just about choice. It's about staking a claim on being Irish. It's about the type of choice and involvement in the affairs of Ireland that the Irish in Britain should be organising for across the board.

On a practical level — and Jack is the supreme pragmatist — it could yield a crop of young talent in as little as ten years for the under-21 team.

On a community level, it would enthrone our youth and their families with the confidence that comes from the knowledge that they also belong.



**TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY STARS?:** The next generation of Irish players, the Republic's under-16 team, will be in action in Turkey next month in the European Championship finals. Back row, from left, are: Kevin Maher (Spurs), Lorcan Costello (Rangers, Dublin), Adrian Cronin (Newcastle, Galway), Barry Prenderville (Cherry Orchard), Darren Kavanagh (Johnville, Waterford) and Gerard Heffernan (Cherry Orchard).

Front row, from left, are: David Nolan (Cherry Orchard), Wesley Byrne (Belvedere), Stephen Carr (Spurs), Gary Tully (Cherry Orchard) and Thomas Morgan (Belvedere).

Midfielder Morgan is on his way to Blackburn Rovers at the end of the season and, no doubt, English league clubs will follow up their interest in other members of the team.

Picture courtesy of the FAI.

## Diaspora

No image of the eighties captured the nature of the modern Irish nation more than the soccer team fielded in 1988 for the European Championship finals. A product of generations of emigration the team was particularly representative of Ireland and the Irish nation. If anything demonstrated to the world in the television age that we are a diaspora nation, it was Ray Houghton knocking arrogant English sports commentators back onto the barbs of their own rhetoric when he scored the winner in Stuttgart.

A grandson of Donegal and a native Glaswegian, his being there was a powerful image for a generation of young Irish-Glaswegians. After Euro '88 a footballing Yeats might have concluded that, in stadia wherever the green was worn, things would be utterly changed.

We beat England and an Irishman, born in Glasgow, scored the goal. A Donegalman, living as a legend in Glasgow shut them all out, even their lionised Lineker.

That utter change has happened in a creaky Parkhead amphitheatre where thousands with the same pedigrees as Ray Houghton and Tommy Coyne have danced and cried. The change is already visible in the psychology of the place.

## Irish identity

It's now possible to demonstrate your Irishness in a footballing way. Whereas before it was only available for the average Celtic fan to demonstrate their identity by becoming a cheerleader for militant republicanism, which is always going to be a minority sport at Parkhead, a far broader greening of Parkhead is now possible.

The sporting pride of Glasgow Celtic's singular support can now be given a national significance: Republic jerseys abound, as well as the colours of Dun Na nGall, gracing this citadel of a foreign game.

The coming World Cup will see two communities of the Irish diaspora meet to celebrate the global village's four yearly kickabout. The thing that strikes you about the parallel universes of bars like Mickey Kavanagh's in Philadelphia and Parkhead pubs on