

# Racism still raises its head in Scotland



As Aiden McGeady leaves Celtic to play for Russian side Spartak Moscow, Phil Mac Giolla Bhain looks back at the young player's time in Glasgow and the horrific abuse he suffered at the hands of so-called soccer fans

LAST week, Aiden McGeady became Scottish football's most expensive export at €12million. The Russian club Spartak Moscow paid this huge sum to acquire his match-winning talent.

His ability as a footballer is not in doubt.

However, his time in the limelight thus far will be characterised by the sustained racist abuse that the young Ireland midfielder received during his time in the SPL.

McGeady made his Celtic debut in April 2004 when he scored in the 1-1 draw against Hearts at Tynecastle and went on to make 252 appearances, scoring 37 goals. He won three league titles, as well as two Scottish Cups and two League Cups.

McGeady's decision to choose the Tricolour over the Saltire was greeted with fury by fans at many Scottish Premier League grounds.

Neil Lennon, now Celtic manager and a former captain of Northern Ireland, stated when he was club captain in 2005: "Aiden had a choice to make, and I am sure he has made a wise one. It was his right to pick Ireland despite whatever a handful of media and a few people in Glasgow might think about it."

Aiden's 'crime' was his country of choice. This was acknowledged by veteran sportswriter Hugh Keavins of the Daily Record who opined on a radio phone-in last season that had Aiden McGeady's grandmother come from Cardiff then it would not have been a problem had her grandson donned the red of Wales.

The harassment and verbal abuse aimed at McGeady for the final years of the last decade as he played for Celtic was racially motivated.

It was not 'banter' or some misplaced Scottish patriotism by soccer fans.

It was motivated by the anti-Irish invective that, sadly, makes

Glasgow a uniquely hostile city in Britain for the outwardly Irish.

It is hard to think of a highly-paid young footballer being the victim of workplace harassment. The pantomime booing is all part of an agreed emotional contract that the paying public sign up for.

However, there is a limit to this, and all soccer clubs and governing bodies accept that racist abuse of a player is over the line.



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Ex-Republic of Ireland international and now anti-racism trainer Kieron Brady, when asked to describe the response of the Scottish soccer authorities to this racist abuse of the Irish winger, said: "The response was non-existent. The blasé attitude of the footballing authorities to anti-Irish racism in Scotland is reminiscent of what befell many black players in England in the 1970s and 1980s. There is a cultural acceptance to anti-Irish racism."

Brady is clear that it was McGeady's country of choice rather than "turning his back on Scotland" that was the issue for many Scottish soccer fans.

"When the abuse takes the form of 'Aiden McGeady why don't you go home' by supporters, or he is verbally abused as a 'Mick' — as he was by a St. Mirren fan — it does point to his national identity as the motivation behind such invective. Aiden played in Scotland for six years, and to my knowledge there were no songs and chants that took the form of labelling him as a traitor, quisling etc."

Aiden McGeady is the embodiment of something that remains a social crime in modern Scotland: an Irish identity.

Speaking to Hugh McDonald of The Herald, Aiden McGeady said: "I was getting fed up with Glasgow. I wanted to leave. Nothing against Celtic — it's Glasgow."

Of anti-Irish racism he said: "There are a lot of horrible places in Scotland for that type of thing: Tynecastle, Ibrox obviously is always going to be bad with the Celtic-Rangers rivalry, Motherwell, Falkirk."

"Some fans there hate everything Celtic stand for and everything I stand for as an Irish Catholic playing for Celtic."

Piara Powar, the executive Director of the FARE network, stated: "Discrimination and abuse based on national origin may not be as obvious as that based on skin colour, but it can be just as damaging."

In October 2008, I interviewed SPL chief Lex Gold about the Famine Song.

During that interview I referred to the constant racist abuse that McGeady got at most grounds in Scotland.

His reply was: "Yeah, but he's a lot more mature now and can handle it a lot better."

It is hard to think that had the target of the abuse been black rather than an Irish international that he would have said the same.

■ [www.philmacgiollabhain.com](http://www.philmacgiollabhain.com)



Former Celtic star Aiden McGeady has left the vitriol of fans in Glasgow behind him. His only crime? Choosing to play for Ireland ahead of Scotland.

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