

**SPORTING MATTERS**

**BY PETER JACK**

# When two tribes go to war!

I'M not sure if Frankie Goes to Hollywood were singing about sport when they released this classic track in 1984 but as we know, sport can be the equivalent of war for teams representing their nation.

When Hungary played the USSR in the Olympic water polo final in Melbourne in 1956, it was the first time the two countries had met since the USSR had rolled their tanks into Budapest a few months earlier to quell a democratic uprising.

The match was called 'Blood in the Water', such was the ferocity of the protagonists. The Hungarian players managed to pull off a famous victory to give hope to their oppressed fellow countrymen. I was present at a re-run of the match at the Olympics in Sydney in 2000 and feelings, even then, were still running high.

Similarly, when the USA beat the USSR in the 1980 Olympic final in the 'Miracle on Ice' against all the odds and then when the USSR beat the USA in basketball in the 1972 Olympics in Munich,

both matches were seen as settling military scores within the confines of a sporting arena.

In other words, we are all capable of taking our love of sport fairly seriously.

I was at two events on different days last weekend at either end of the country where several tribes were going to war. The first was a GAA match between Derry/Doire and Meath, the second was a football match between Northern Ireland and Slovenia. Both were different but they were also similar in some ways too.

I stood for two different National Anthems. I also stood for a minute's silence for the victims of the Buncrana drownings and the Brussels bombings. Both of these were immaculately observed. It was a stark reminder that, unlike what Bill Shankly once

famously uttered, Sport was not as important as life and death.

Patriotism is often said to be the last refuge of a scoundrel... but there was one thing the respective managers of the Derry team and the Northern Ireland team have in common. Michael O'Neill and Damian Barton could only pick players who are regionally qualified to play for that team, unlike, say Manchester United ie, they couldn't sign up players or buy them in from another country or county.

By and large, what county you are born in dictates what county you play for and therefore support for the rest of your life.

You could change your religion easier than the team of your county and parish.

The worldwide football eligibility is a bit hazier. Everyone remembers Jack Charlton's eligibility criteria to ascertain if a player could represent the Republic, 'Does he have a granny from Cork?' Or 'Has he ever drunk a Guinness?' And indeed Northern Ireland were playing a striker from QPR, one Conor Washington, who had only recently set foot in Northern Ireland once before his international debut. It was somewhat

ironical then that a bloke with a Southern-English accent scored the winner! I'm not sure if young Conor has a granny from Greenisland but maybe he drinks Harp?

**CLASSIC FOUR POINTER**

On Sunday I was a guest of Derry's GAA to watch a crucial relegation encounter between two teams in the National Football League Division Two. It was the classic four pointer.

If Derry won, they would virtually escape relegation and condemn Meath to the trap door. If Meath won, the green and golds would be safe and the red and white Oak Leafers would have to go to Armagh to eke

out a win to avoid the ignominy of playing Division Three football next season. The league is basically four teams of eight from the 32 counties - plus London who are in Division Four. Not only is the diaspora of the GAA flourishing in London but also in Brittany where scores of young French speakers are now playing the Gaelic Game with a garlick and Gallic flare not seen previously in Gweedore or Galway!

The facilities at Owenbeg are mightily impressive! A guest of Derry GAA showed me around the weights room, the media centre and the various well-appointed committee rooms and the all-important hospitality suite where I enjoyed several cups of very welcome tea on a bitterly cold Easter day.

Huge photographs of the victorious Sam Maguire winning team of 1993 adorned the walls to inspire the latest generation.

I recognised Anthony Tohill (who was invited over for a trial at Old Trafford but Anthony didn't want to be the next Kevin Moran, he was very happy playing for his beloved county) and Joe Broolly, a local hero from Dungiven - as skilful and combative now in the media field as he was on the field of play all those years ago.

I actually held the Sam Maguire trophy in my hands in 1993 in the Waveney Hospital in Ballymena which, as the more discerning of you will know, is not in County Derry. It must have been spirited across the Antrim Border for the night!

It is a beautiful trophy, one that is held aloft by the winning captain on the fourth Sunday every September in Croke Park. The cup was made in 1928 for 300 quid, the equivalent now would be over £20,000!

History and tradition are interwoven in GAA and this close knit community from the local parishes means there is an all-for-one, one-for-all mentality when the

teams go out on the pitch.

The first round of the Ulster Championship is not until May 22 in Celtic Park against Tyrone with all 18,000 tickets long sold out. But the league is the meat and potatoes of the domestic season. If you win a few games, then you gain confidence for the winding and hopefully long road ahead.

Kerry (known as The Tribe) are the most successful county, winners of the year ending event on 37 occasions and Dublin are next with 24 wins (I was privileged enough to be there a few years ago when they beat Mayo in the final). Derry have won a measly one!

No doubt this year's crop of players would love to emulate Anthony, Joe and indeed their current manager, Damian Barton as winners of the All Ireland but they will need to play with more accuracy, pace and power than they displayed against Meath who brought with them a surprising amount of supporters, all willing to pay the £12.00 entrance fee. Derry regained the lead early in the second half, and at one stage, were coasting 5 points up.

**COLLECTIVE NARCOLEPSY**

A collective narcolepsy seem to afflict the red and whites and Meath took advantage of Derry's Rip Van Winkle somnolence as they scored six unanswered points as Derry slumbered and lumbered in the middle of the pitch.

The Bainisteoir (Manager) Damian who had been banished to the side lines for eight matches thanks to a previous indiscretion caused by over exuberance, managed to roar from the other side of the barrier separating the combatants from the non-combatants and finally woke up his charges, who at that stage, were staring at Division three football for next season.

In the third and last minute of injury time, Derry were saved at the bell by Ryan Bell who lobbed over an equalising free to salvage pride - and also Division Two

status! The hostility on the pitch was more than compensated by the hospitality in the stands. I thanked my hosts for a fascinating look behind the scenes at the successful project that is Team Derry.

Top class sporting facilities don't come cheaply. The new Ravenhill (sorry, Kingspan Stadium) is a thing of beauty. Owenbeg is also a wonderful facility with a 3G pitch and lots of fantastic training facilities for youngsters and thanks to the hard work of the local committee, there is only a very manageable loan still to pay off.

Owenbeg would grace any stage, but what about Windsor Park? Or to give it its full title, the National Football Stadium.

The last time I was there was on November 17 1982 when we, ie, Northern Ireland, beat West Germany as it was then called.

A month's sobriety from me went down the swanney as we won 1-0 with a goal from Ian Stewart who, funnily enough, also played for QPR, (the same team as Northern Ireland's latest goal scoring winner). To call the 1982 Windsor Park a toilet would be to insult a toilet. To be kind, it was a functional ground at best.

The atmosphere however was fantastic. After the final whistle in 1982, we pogoed up and down the terraces that much that my glasses fell off and I haven't seen them since! Little did I think that, 34 years later, I would have the honour

of attending the same ground with my son Mark. Mark has been to Ravenhill, the Aviva, the Stadio Olimpico in Rome, the London Olympic Stadium, the Millennium Stadium in Cardiff, Wembley and Twickenham in London, Old Trafford in Manchester and St. James Park in Newcastle... but he had never been to Windsor Park!

As soon as we entered the ground we were impressed! I didn't recognise any of the old ground. All four sections had been transformed with only the East Stand still under construction.

In the 14th minute, we applauded the life of the recently deceased Johan Cruyff, the great Dutch, Ajax and Barcelona ring-master and there was a lot of applause all night for the committed and cohesive display from a home team which may only have had three or four premiership players but who all played

like a team, not a bunch of individuals.

Like Derry the day before, they played for the shirt! If there was not a lot of panache, there sure was a lot of passion.

We even had a penalty save from Roy Carroll who, for me, was Man of the Match.

Northern Ireland have two more warm-up matches before the European Championships in France with our first match scheduled for Sunday June 12 against Poland.

Mark and I won't be there as we'll both be in Leeds for the International Triathlon Union World Triathlon Series Race just before the Olympics.

Northern Ireland will travel in hope more than expectation to Paris but Poland, as well as Ukraine on June 16 and Germany on June 21, will all know that they will have been in a war against Michael O'Neil's green and white army!



Derry's Conor McAtamney goes to ground in the clash against Meath. NCL13-8900DOK



MJ and PJ in the newly opened South Stand, Windsor Park. NCL14-05s



PJ's view from the grandstand. NCL14-04s



Roy Carroll's wonderful penalty save. NCL14-07s



View from the South Stand. NCL14-06s