



FC IRLANDE

A HISTORY OF 25 YEARS (and more)
OF IRISH FOOTBALL IN BRUSSELS



A close-up, low-angle shot of a soccer ball hitting a goal net. The ball is white with black panels and is partially obscured by the white netting. The background is a clear blue sky. The netting creates a complex geometric pattern of triangles and diamonds.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND THANKS

A large number of current and former club members have contributed to the development and publication of this 25th Anniversary history of FC Irlande. In particular, the club would like to thank Robert Missen who has, since the beginning, acted as club statistician and “historian” keeping a faithful record of the successes and failures, highs and lows of this great club and its teams. Thanks to Robert, we have been able to develop this important record of our history into this publication. We are grateful to Denis O’Sullivan, a former club President, for his contributions and journalistic skills in eliciting tall tales and stories from teams and members. Thanks finally to all those who gave their thoughts, reminiscences, stories, memories and photos which together, make this a unique celebration of our great club.

Lastly, the club gratefully acknowledges the generous financial support towards the 25th Celebrations provided by Hume Brophy Public Affairs and Communications and Deloitte as well as the on-going support of our club sponsor, the Hairy Canary & Funky Monkey Pubs.

Dave Verdon
President, FC Irlande



HUME BROPHY

GLOBAL REACH. LOCAL INFLUENCE.



CONGRATULATIONS
FC IRLANDE ON YOUR 25TH
ANNIVERSARY AND BEST
WISHES FOR FURTHER
SUCCESS IN THE FUTURE



BRUSSELS

DUBLIN

LONDON

PARIS

SINGAPORE

A WINNING TEAM

We are an international communications firm specialising in Public Relations, Investor Relations, Public Affairs, Corporate and Financial Communications.

***HUME BROPHY** are proud sponsors of
FC Irlande's 25th Anniversary Celebrations*

www.humebrophy.com

STRENGTH THROUGH PARTNERSHIP

Contents

Editorial	6
A word from the President	7
A message from the Ambassador	8
History of the club	
Part 1 - The formative years 1973 - '89	9
Part 2 - The age of innocence 1989 - '94	12
Part 3 - The club doubles in size - 1994 - 2001	18
Part 4 - Promotion to the 1st Division - TWICE!	30
Part 5 - The club comes of age - and wins the league!	41
Part 6 - FC Irlande Ladies Football	52
Epilogue - The club at 25 - what the future holds	57
In memoriam	58
Annexes:	
<i>Annex 1 - FC Irlande Captains</i>	59
<i>Annex 2 - FC Irlande Presidents</i>	59
<i>Annex 3 - FC Irlande Home Venues</i>	60
<i>Annex 4 - What has changed in 25 years</i>	63
<i>Annex 5 - The Amazing 25th Anniversary Weekend</i>	64



“2 September 2014 marks the 25th anniversary of FC Irlanda commencing its existence in ABSSA ”

Editorial

2 September 2014 will mark the 25th anniversary of FC Irlande playing its first ever match in ABSSA and this booklet is an attempt to capture the events not only of those seasons, but also with the Irish footballing activities in Brussels that led to the creation of FC Irlande in 1989.

Inevitably, the writing of any history cannot cover every single happening, nor mention every name. So, apologies are due to the reader if specific events that he/she remembers are not covered, nor if anything other than a selection of players names are sprinkled throughout the work (with apologies if any spelling mistakes have slipped through!). It would have been nice to have had a detailed list of all FC Irlande players over 25 years, together with the appropriate statistics but, alas, paperwork has never been one of the strengths of the club! Indeed, as a club we have preferred oral tradition to keeping written records of events past!

Compiling this history has reminded me of two facts that are often overlooked in the organised chaos that is Saturday

afternoon football. Firstly, the club owes a lot to the minority of people who selflessly volunteer to do all the tasks, large and small, that permit the majority to simply turn up and play football. The Club owes all of you a big 'thank you'. In particular, the work of the ABSSA football secretaries - from Gerry McGovern to Antonio Nobre – have been crucial to the success of the club. Without them the intricacies of the ABSSA administration would never have been mastered and we simply could not have played.

Secondly, football brings out passions and emotions. Often players get frustrated. So it is sometimes easy to forget how much pleasure FC Irlande has given so many people. Many friendships have been cemented in the (often too tight) green shirts of FC Irlande. It is safe to say that around 500 have played for FC Irlande mens teams, plus many others for the ladies teams. And it is notable how many non-Irish players the club has had (myself included) – at least 20 different nationalities. The Irish community in Belgium can be proud of

the positive image that FC Irlande has given of the Irish people – may the team long continue and thrive!

The contents of this history are not the work of one person. However, I would single out Denis O'Sullivan for thanks for his unselfish willingness to chase up people so that this history is as complete as possible. Thanks also must be given to the dozens of people that have contributed texts. Clearly, in interests of balance not everything that was submitted has been included in its entirety: as editor I accept full responsibility.

Equally, we have masses of photographs of FC Irlande donated to the club archives from which we have selected only a representative few for this history – but many more (as well as this history) will be available on the FC Irlande website: <http://fcirlande.org>

Robert Missen
Editor

Introduction

This history of FC Irlande has been compiled to commemorate the club's 25th anniversary.

When the idea of an expatriate Irish team in Brussels first began to be discussed a quarter of a century ago we all believed that the idea was a sustainable one. However, I doubt that any of us would have predicted that 25 years later we would have a club with seven teams and over 150 playing members!

The journey from then to now has been an interesting and fun one. This history

has rekindled many good memories for me. I hope that you will get similar enjoyment from reading this, even if you may not have been involved with the club as long as I have!

A large number of current and former club members have contributed to the development and publication of this 25th Anniversary history of FC Irlande. The club thanks to all of them for their efforts, however great or small, in the telling of this story.

Finally, the club gratefully acknowledges

the generous financial support of Hume Brophy Public Affairs and Communications which has made this publication possible, in addition to the support received from the current sponsor of the Club, namely „the Hairy Canary“/“the Funky Monkey“ which allows us to play football in the green-and-white every Saturday.

Dave Verdon

Current President, FC Irlande



A message from the Ambassador

It is a great honour to be here tonight as the Guest of Honour at the Silver Jubilee celebrations of FC Irlande.

As the Ambassador for Ireland to the Kingdom of Belgium two of my most important tasks include reaching out to the Irish diaspora in this country and promoting all that is good about Ireland to the people of Belgium.

I am delighted to see that FC Irlande is performing a similar role and has been doing so for a quarter of a century.

The Irish people love sport – it is in our blood. Athleticism and sporting fair play on the field, and camaraderie and craic after the game are hallmarks of the Irish people.

I know that FC Irlande is helping to maintain these values and, in the process, enhancing the reputation of our country as well as bringing pleasure to hundreds of footballers, both male and female.

As a club you started from a relatively small base but have developed impressively into an organization with seven teams and some 150 members. These great advances deserve to be applauded.

Finally you have progressed up to the top division of your league and have already won the league title once in your history.

May you win it many more times over the next 25 years and enjoy continued success in the name of Ireland!

Éamonn Mac Aodha

Ambassador of Ireland to the Kingdom of Belgium, H.E.



Part 1 - The Formative Years

FC Irlande may have played its first official game in 1989 but the club's beginnings can be traced back a full decade earlier to the 1970s.

The accession of Ireland into the European Community in 1973 was the major single reason for many Irish people to move to Brussels, with career opportunities at the European Institutions and other international organisations. The influx of young(ish), healthy(ish) Irishmen saw the creation of the Irish European Communities Gaelic Club as a sporting outlet.

Under the stewardship of Gerry MacPolin, the Gaelic Club formed a nucleus of keen sports enthusiasts. As well as organising regular training and Gaelic football/hurling matches the club also organised occasional football matches against other expatriate communities in Brussels (Danes, Norwegians etc). Thus Gerry sowed the initial seeds of an Irish football team in Brussels.

At that time in Brussels there were two expatriate football clubs for English speakers, namely the Royal Brussels British FC, founded in 1934 and the oldest club in ABSSA and British United, founded in 1972 as a breakaway club from Royal Brussels British. These were the natural focal points for those wishing to play Saturday afternoon football. And it should be remembered that until the late 1980s there were no Irish bars in Brussels so the natural focal point for Anglophone footballers would have been British pubs like "The Cock and Bull", "the Corkscrew" and "the eefeater".

In 1977 a young man from Co Cavan by the name of Gerry McGovern arrived in Brussels and moved quickly into the social and sporting scene. Gerry joined British United and helped them gain promotion to Div 2 in the 1978 -79

season. In July 1979 Dave Verdon arrived in Brussels and responded to a British United advert looking for players. At the first pre-season practice at Tombeek, near Wavre, Dave met Gerry for the first time. Whilst not quite matching the significance of Paul meeting John at the church fete in Liverpool in 1957, Gerry and Dave's friendship would prove to be a key factor in what would evolve into FC Irlande some 10 years later. In 1980 Gerry and Dave went on the first ever overseas tour for a Brussels-based expatriate football club when British United visited California. The significance of this was that Gerry, in the tour programme, declared his dream to one day set up an Irish Football Club in Brussels.

In the following years more people arrived in Brussels who would play a key role in the development of the Club, including Joe Swan and Paddy McEneaney. Joe joined British United where he soon gained a reputation as a regular goalscoring centre forward. Paddy and his wife Susan would play a major role in both the Gaelic Club and the (non-sporting) Irish Club organising many social events, often with sporting themes – in the days before easy access to RTE via satellite dishes Paddy was the impresario who organised live tv transmissions of football and GAA matches!

In the football season 1982-83 Liverpool would beat Watford to the English 1st Division title, Athlone Town won the League of Ireland. Meanwhile, in Belgium, a significant step in the history of FC Irlande took place when a new midweek football competition called 'the Embassy League' was created. As the name implied it was ostensibly a football tournament for teams from the various embassies and Irish diplomat Gerry Hickey was the man who took

the initiative to enter an Ireland team into the league. Gerry had a lot of drive and managed to put out strong teams most weeks, though in practice the non-diplomats in the Irish team usually outnumbered the diplomats by five to one! To help him Gerry enlisted the support of Scot Hugh Gallagher (of the Donegal Gallaghers) from the Royal Brussels British who captained the team in their first season.

All the Embassy League games were played on Tuesday evenings under floodlights in Londerzeel, about 25 km north of Brussels. The footballing standard was quite high and there were many hotly contested games against Spain, Germany, Italy, Russia, and Portugal – who, for inexplicable reasons, would become the sworn enemy of Irish football teams.

1983 also saw the inaugural "Irish Player of the Year" dinner – the original event being held in "Les Tuilleries" restaurant near the Botanique (at the time close to the offices of the Irish Permanent Representation to the EC). Gerry H left Brussels in 1985 to return to Ireland where his career flourished and he ultimately worked in the private office of the Irish Taoiseach Bertie Ahern as Programme Manager.

In the period 1982-86 more Irish players had arrived in Brussels including Paul McCourt, Noel Egan, John Ludden, Niall Thompson, Bill Sexton, Mick Hamell and Liam Breslin. The influx of players strengthened the football team and in 1985-86 after coming close a number of times in previous years Ireland finally won the Embassy League under the captaincy of Noel "Mister Motivator" Egan. An Irish football team in Brussels had won its first trophy!

The influx into Brussels of young footballers was continuing. 1986 and

1987 saw the arrival of players such as Liam Durack, John Lalor, Paddy Kenneally, John O'Sullivan, and Robert Missen – the first three of whom came over to watch Big Jack's Irish team get a 2-2 draw against Belgium in a European Championship qualifying game in Sept 1986 and forgot to go back home!

No less than six of the regular line-up for Ireland in the midweek Embassy League were now playing for FC Royal Brussels British 1st team in Division 1 of ABSSA, namely Paul McCourt, Liam Durack, Niall Thompson, John Lalor, Jim McGrath and Dave Verdon (who had transferred to BBFC from British United in 1983). Thus, it was clear that there were enough good Irish players in Brussels to merit a Saturday league team. But how to get a team off the ground? In particular, how would Irishmen, with their natural aversion to rules and bureaucracy, ever be able to register a club with a Belgian league?

The solution came via another Irish footballer. Joe Swan was playing football in a Saturday morning league - ABFA - for a Belgian team called Rangers 79. He recruited other Irish players to join him and in 1987 the Rangers President Erwin Minnebo offered his 2nd team to be run by the Irish squad en masse on condition that he could bolster his 1st team – in a higher division - with the occasional Irish player or two. This offered the perfect solution – entry to a Belgian league for an Irish team, but without the headaches of the administration. The offer was gratefully accepted and most of the Irish expats signed up for FC Rangers in 1987.

FC Rangers played their home matches in Woluwe St Pierre at Rue Kelle on a

pitch hemmed in by modern apartment blocks (where, coincidentally, Rangers 2 captain Mick Hamell and Gaelic Club President Liam Breslin were living a dissolute batchelor lifestyle together).

ABFA was a league that played on Saturday mornings. Thus the home matches of FC Rangers 2 always kicked off at 09.30 which proved to be a wonderful tonic for those players tempted by the evils of drink on Friday evenings, especially on crisp winter mornings! (The team would meet at 08.30 in the bar adjacent to the pitch - purely to keep warm, of course!!). The kick off times of ABFA meant that players could still be registered with Royal Brussels British/British United and play matches in ABSSA on the Saturday afternoon as well – and several players were playing two matches on Saturdays! (Ah, the impetuosity of youth!)



FC Rangers circa 1988

By 1988 there were already too many Irish players for regular football with FC Rangers 2 - it should be remembered that this period coincided with the renaissance of football in Ireland under Jack Charlton – and so it was decided to enter a second Irish team in the Embassy

league (with the unofficial sobriquet 'the Castoff Casuals'). As a result the charms of driving home at 1am on Wednesday mornings from the bright lights of Londerzeel's nightspots were introduced to dozens of new players (thankfully the A12 road is a straight one). The club was not particularly wealthy in those days and so the 2nd team wore a white polyester kit that had seen better days: many of those who played then still suffer thromboses from wearing football shirts that were at least three sizes too small..... (today's players who complain about the condition of the kits have no idea what delights they have missed in the past!)

One significant newcomer during this time was Pat O'Reilly whose job for Monsanto had brought him to Brussels. Pat was, by first choice, a Meath hurler of high standard, and his natural athleticism made him a strong footballing midfielder and he soon also began to take a leading role in the events that would eventually lead to the formation of the club.

As with all relationships things change over time. Thus, as the Irish contingent of FC Rangers grew stronger (and provided the bulk of the young players into what was an aging club) the hosts would borrow ever more of the good Irish players. Whilst this was fully in accordance with the deal it meant that FC Rangers 2 was never as strong as it could have been and a mixture of discontent about this situation, together with self-confidence meant that throughout the 88-89 season discussions about the creation of an independent Irish football team continued to grow.

However there were also many doubters and questions were raised. Amongst those were:

- Would an Irish team cope with the Belgian love of all things administrative, such as registering a squad of players with the league (requiring the completion of lots of individual registration cards)?
- Would it be capable of dealing with all the administrative procedures of the league, including form filling on match day?
- Would the players be disciplined enough to bring their identity cards to every game for presentation – and be at games at least 30 minutes before kick off?
- Who would be prepared to take on all the work of setting up and running a football club?
- Would talented young Irish players such as Liam Durack, Paul McCourt and John O’Sullivan then playing in Div 1 with Royal Brussels British be prepared to drop down to Div 6 and play football at a much lower level, simply in order to play for an Irish team?
- Would there be sufficient support from expatriate Irishmen to ensure a football team could be run in a sustainable manner?

The latter question in particular was of concern to the Committee of the Gaelic Club which oversaw all organised Irish sports activities and was not sure that there would be the necessary support required to sustain a soccer club. (Interestingly, many of the questions are just as pertinent today).

The proponents of an Irish football team felt that they had positive answers to all of these questions and decided to proceed. On 17 May 1989 at a specially convened meeting of the Gaelic Club

held at the premises of the Irish Club on Rue de Spa a motion to set up a “soccer” football club and apply for ABSSA membership was put forward. Dave Verdon presented the case to the assembled 25 or so Gaelic Club members. When it came to a vote the decision was a unanimous ‘yes’! Furthermore, the club took the decision to enter two teams from the start, based on the relative success of the 2nd team in the Embassy league in showing that there was a large untapped source of Irishmen who would like to play football (with the clear understanding that the second team would be a feeder for the 1st team).

Gaelic Club President Denis Cagney became the first President of FC Irlande and other key appointments were then agreed. Dave Verdon was elected 1st team Captain and Pat Naghten 2nd team captain. Gerry McGovern

volunteered to take the post of ABSSA secretary (and thus play a key role in the considerable administrative tasks that had to be performed before the new season). It was decided that the club should be called FC Irlande, to indicate the willingness of the Irish diaspora to integrate into Belgium. The club colours were, of course, chosen to be green and white. A young bank official and member of the ABSSA Committee called Robert Stas (who would subsequently become ABSSA President) was extremely helpful to the novices who were registered as club No. 402 in ABSSA. The club set itself the goal of promotion to the highest level for the first team being the priority of the new club.

FC Irlande had been born! However, not everybody welcomed the news: upon hearing it the Ayatollah Khomeini died.....



Part 2 - The age of innocence

Season 1

1989-1990

Both teams in Division 6

After all the paperwork was done FC Irlande I and II made their debuts in ABSSA on 2 September, 1989. Both teams were in the bottom (6th) tier of the ABSSA triangle, but in different divisions.

As there was only one pitch available for home games it was agreed for the first season that the teams alternate home games. Thus for the opening matches in the ABSSA history of FC Irlande – on a lovely, warm late-summer day – the 1st team played away at Amicale Presse and won 3-2 (Joe Swan scoring two and Noel Egan the other) whilst the 2nd team had the pleasure of being the first to play on the beautiful home pitch, winning 4-1 against RC De la Cure (goals from Tom McGrath (2), Pat Naghten and Gerry McGovern). The scorelines were ironic, as in those opening seasons there were very few Saturdays when the 1st team were outscored by the 2nds! After the first games the first “pink sheets” were filled out and, incredibly, these were done correctly! FC Irlande was on its way!

The first season proved, as expected, an easy ride for the 1st team – winning 18 out of 20 games (drawing the remaining two) and scoring 70 goals with only 10 against. One of those two draws was against Portugal – against whom a rivalry had begun in the Embassy League and would, for no obvious reason, become the bitterest of FC Irlande opponents.

(There has never been anything but good spirit between FC Irlande and Brussels British and British United). Dave Verdon’s captaincy was such a success that word spread as far as East Germany where the locals ripped down the Berlin Wall in their enthusiasm to come and watch the FC Irlande II!

Interestingly, the top scorer for the 1st team in that opening season was not Paul McCourt (who bagged 12 goals) but Noel Egan with 14 goals (and none were penalties). As part of their invincible run the 1sts went 13 games between 23 September and 17 February conceding only a single goal (the spell included a run of 7 consecutive clean sheets!!!)

The 2nd team’s season was more mixed, winning 6 and losing 10 of its 19 played matches. Though only conceding 29 goals they were only able to score 22 goals all season – the absence of prolific goal scorers outside the 1st team would be a perennial problem in the club. However, on the positive side the 2nd team always had sufficient numbers to put out a team – in fact, over 40 different players played for FC Irlande that season.

The Embassy League did continue and the club took a policy decision to enter only one team whose primary aim would be to provide football for fun (i.e. the first team squad would save their energies for winning promotion). Much

fun did, indeed, ensue in Londerzeel but alas, at the end of the 89-90 season the league folded.

The tradition of ‘voting’ for a Man of the Match at the end of each game had already commenced. However, that first season there was just a single club player of the year – all the votes being pooled. So, for FC Irlande’s first ever Player of the Year the winner was Mick Kelly: a central defender with the physique of Mick McCarthy, but the skill of Alan Hansen and the charm of Gary Lineker. (It was subsequently decided that for future seasons it would be fairer that each team should nominate its own player of the year).

That year’s Player of the Year dinner – held at the European Commission’s social club in Overijse – was made all the more memorable as, immediately after the dinner, a busload of club members headed southwards to Italy and the World Cup – and witnessed Ireland’s famous penalty shoot-out victory over Romania in Genoa. That was a very long and arduous weekend!!!

Ironically, after all the hard work by the 1st team to win promotion, both teams were promoted as, that summer, ABSSA decided to abolish the 6th tier from its footballing pyramid (Division 6 subsequently becoming the Veterans league)! However, the FC Irlande dream was alive!

PLAYERS WHO PLAYED FOR FC IRLANDE DURING SEASON 1989/90

Liam Breslin
George Brown
Mick Buckley
Dennis Cagney
Vinny Clarke
Dave Crowley
Richard Doherty
Liam Durack
Noel Egan
Paul Gormley

Peter Heavey
Ronan Harbison
Mick Hamell
Mark Hayden
Sam Hewitt
Mick Keane
Mick Kelly
Brian Kelly
John Lonergan
Michael Long

Dermot Lally
John Ludden
Paul McCourt
Mark McCormick
Paddy McEaney
Martin McGarry
Gerry McGovern
Tom McGrath
Niall McHale
Robert Missen

Joe Murran
Pat Naghten
Gene O'Reilly
Pat O'Reilly
John O'Sullivan
Stephen O'Sullivan
Neily Owens
Billy Sexton
Joe Swan
Dave Telfer
Dave Verdon



FC Ireland I - season 1989-90

Season 2

1990-1991

Both teams in Division 5

For the 1990-91 season Pat O'Reilly became 1st team captain and decided that the team needed to reach a higher standard of fitness so Mick Hamell was appointed as club trainer to get the lads into shape. Mr Hamell's training methods belied his GAA background and so the emphasis was less on individual coaching patterns and special dietary regimes and more on having the players perform excruciating exercises until they dropped in collective exhaustion. With his distinctive purple tracksuit and sergeant major-like charm Mick is fondly remembered by those who experienced it! (Several survivors of those days claim they still have a pavlovian urge to drop to the ground and do 20 press-ups whenever they see somebody wearing a purple tracksuit).

The training itself was done on Thursday nights at Auderghem Sports Centre on an all-weather pitch. The red gravel of that pitch would become notorious, particularly amongst players wives, as immense quantities of the stuff would be brought home, impregnated into players training kits to be deposited (and subsequently clog up) washing machines in households throughout Brussels. (This was not a problem for the bachelors in the team who, seemingly, never washed their kits). Particularly memorable was how training would always culminate in a 1sts v 2nds match played with a passion and ferocity that would do a cup final proud – it was surprising that nothing other than pride was ever injured during these nocturnal tussles!

For the second season FC Irlande had arranged (with both ABBSA and the British School) that both teams could play

at home 'back-to-back'. This, together with the training sessions, helped to build a close-knit club (and led to the creation of a scurrilous newsletter called 'the News of the Gaelic Club World' that highlighted the hidden secrets of many a player).

After the success of its debut season the 1st team was already able to attract expats from other clubs. Niall Thompson returned to strengthen the squad, having played two seasons of Provincial level football.

Pat was able to continue where Dave had left off. The 1sts started the season with eight consecutive victories – thus demoralising their rivals by the end of October - and went on to win the league comfortably without losing a single game. The teams record for 1990-91 was played 22, won 18 drew 4 lost 0 and a massive total of 96 goals were scored – 24 by Paul McCourt, 20 by speedy Welsh winger Geraint Williams (who had joined the club at the end of the previous season) and 18 by Niall Thompson: probably the strongest strikeforce that FC Irlande has ever possessed. Other new regular players for the 1st that season included George Brown and Mick Nevin.

For season 2 the reins of 2nd team captaincy were picked up by Tom McGrath – and thus began the 'golden age' of blanché drinking! (Like a binge of George Best's this was to last four seasons!!). Under the new captaincy the season started fantastically well – five straight wins – before tailing off. But the team was able to win 12 of its 24 games and new regulars included Sam Hewitt

and Austin Rowan. Top scorer was Jimmy Phelan with 10 goals – though he did get 6 of those in the opening-day fixture (a game which also saw debuts for Irlande from Ian McConnell and Mick Nevin). Ian was a promising youth player that Niall had brought with him to FC Irlande: at 44 years of age made his debut for the 2nd team on the opening day of the season and scored! (A feat he's being trying to repeat for 19 years!) Ian's talents were soon recognised by Pat O'Reilly and he was swiftly promoted into the 1st team, as were Mick Nevin's – though originally as goalie!

The British School were generally content with Irlande to play on their pristine football pitch, but did have a condition saying that, in times of inclement weather, they would have the ultimate say in whether the pitch was playable. Only once did they invoke this clause requiring Irlande to forfeit a match – and ironically it was the day that the 1st team was due to play its arch rivals FC Portugal! Such was the bad blood that, even though Gerry McGovern – as ABBSA secretary – telephoned them to say that they had a 5-0 forfeit the Portuguese thought that this was a trick and turned up to play! Meanwhile the two Irish teams were several kilometres away at the Auderghem training ground playing a 1sts v 2nds game!!!

A second successive promotion for the 1st team was celebrated by the club and Ian McConnell was named 1st team Player of the Year – the oldest player in the club ever to do so, with Mick Kelly getting the 2nd team Player of the Year trophy (to pair with his trophy from the previous season).

Season 3

1991-1992

FC Irlande I in Division 4, FC Irlande II in Division 5

A new season – two new captains. For the 1sts Liam Durack took over. Things didn't start well for him when Irlande lost the first game of the season. This was a big shock as the 1st team had not been beaten for 2 years – a run of 42 games unbeaten. (The team that inflicted that first defeat – 0-1 – were “Qualitaet”, who clearly lived up to their name that day). However, this proved to be a minor blip and although losing 2 more games in the course of the season FC Irlande I ended up the season with 17 wins and 4 draws and again secured promotion to the next level. The McCourt/Thompson/Williams strike force netted 35 goals between them. New recruits to the 1st team squad included Jimmy Conway.

The 2nd team went backwards a little under new captain Robert Missen – winning only 4 out of 23 games (and none at home!) – but a net goal difference of only -5 told the story of a team that lost games by the odd goal. New regulars to the team included Ian

Menzies, Ronan Ivory, Neal Pakey – scoring 10 goals in the season - and Alan Davison. Alan, who played as goalie, showed the power of sport: his family included Ulster loyalist paramilitaries and yet happily played (and was accepted) into a club with Gaelic roots. Additionally, Neal Pakey was a devout Glasgow Rangers fan – but it didn't prevent him pulling on a (tight) green hooped shirt every week!

The kit was always a talking point for the club committee and a significant policy decision was taken in season 91-92: up until then the kit bag contained everything i.e. shirts, shorts and socks. However, after an unfortunate incident with the first team kit when Geraint Williams decided to boil wash the entire kit (!) it was agreed that players should provide their own shorts and socks.

Travelling to away games has always been fun and in those days it was more of an adventure. Whilst the club was

new to ABSSA now-familiar destinations such as Vogelzang, Mahatma Gandhi or Chaussee de Neerstalle were all strange and exotic places to be found for the first time. And it should be noted that this was long before the days of mobile phones or sat-nav systems for cars.

The solution was that the teams would meet collectively – usually the car park at Kraainem metro station – where a convoy of eight or nine cars would form and head off to the game. On a good day nobody would get lost! But it was no mean feat for the lead car in such convoys to keep track in their mirror of several trailing cars.

Players of the year for season 91-92 were Pat O'Reilly for the 1st team and Brian Kelly for the 2nd team – it seemed as if destiny would ensure a Kelly would always be player of the year!

Season 4

1992-1993

FC Irlande I in Division 3, FC Irlande II in Division 5

With the 1st team now in Division 3 a much tougher season than the previous three was expected. Pat O'Reilly took up the challenge by again taking the reins as captain of the 1st team. Ironically, despite being in a higher division the team lost fewer games than the previous season – only one match – but drew 9 of the 26 games. Nonetheless, a strong squad secured promotion by finishing 2nd just missing out on the top spot by a couple of points. Midway through the season one of the club's outstanding players Paul McCourt left Brussels.

Paul had amassed a total of 55 goals in only 72 appearances and he left as the club's all-time top scorer – a record that would take a further three years to be surpassed (by Niall Thompson).

His place was filled partly by the promotion of Neal Pakey (scoring 12 goals) and newcomer Ronan Cashell (13 goals). However, the team's top scorer in 92-93 was Niall with 15 goals. Other key recruits for the 1st team that season included John Reeves, Tim Daly, Karl Howley, Trevor Smith and Terry Waite.

Austin Rowan became 2nd team supremo that season and under his captaincy the 2nd team finally achieved success, winning promotion to Division 4. The team lost only 4 games throughout the season, and were unbeaten away from home. (The team also set a record of always outstaying their hosts in the away team bars – as well as at the bar of the British School, of course! The share price of Hoegaarden beer climbed 23% in 1993 on the strength of the 2nd team's winning streak!). For once the 2nd team had proven goalscorers and Nick Burgess (11 goals), Tim Feighery and Reinhard Fink (each 9 goals) were three main reasons for promotion.

With two promoted teams 1992-93 was the club's most successful so far. Players of the Year that year were Geraint Williams (1st team) and Reinhard Fink (2nd team) – the club's first non-Irish/British Player of the Year (together with the first Welsh winner!).

During the season ABSSA had begun to express their dissatisfaction about the home venue. In particular, they objected

to the lack of changing facilities adjacent to the Elephant Pitch, citing the 'danger' of players having to cross the busy Leuvensesteenweg. (At one stage the club even hired a bus to shuttle players the 400m between pitch and dressing room). The committee was intelligent enough to recognise the intransigence of ABSSA: it was clear that they would not let FC Irlande continue to play matches at the British School. After some efforts, mainly by Dave Verdon and Pat O'Reilly, the club was able to find (almost brand new) facilities at Bosstraat, Kraainem – home of New Inn FC. Thus another chapter in the history of FC Irlande ended on 24 April 1993 when the teams played their last home league game at the British School.

The new home ground had two pitches. This opened up the possibility to have more than two teams. Thus another momentous decision was taken by the Committee during the close-season: 1993-94 saw the creation of FC Irlande III.



1sts v 2nds at the British School, 1993

THE BIRTH (PANGS) OF THE THIRD TEAM

By Liam O'Sullivan, the original captain

By late 1992, it had become apparent that the existing two team structure within FC Irlande was insufficient to meet the needs of a rapidly expanding playing membership. The Third team was therefore founded in early 1993 to fulfil the need of providing competitive football for the growing number of players in the club outside the existing first and second team squads.

The team played an extended series of friendly matches in the early part of 1993 and entered ABSSA for the 1993/94 season. The Thirds throughout its existence had a big squad and for this reason, and because also of the team's origins, it was decided to retain the egalitarian principle that the full squad would rotate into the team as much as possible.

The historic team to take the field for the opening fixture against Brussels British had something of an international flavour, consisting of eight Irishmen (Liam O'Sullivan, John Kenny, Eamonn Sheehy, Mick Walsh, P.J. Devereux, Noel Egan, Liam Breslin and Paddy McEneaney), an Australian (Clive d'Santos) and two Egyptians (Hisham el Kamel and Hassan el Killeny). The absence of British players, normally an integral part of the make-up of FC Irlande sides, was clearly politically motivated.

For the 1993-94 season, O'Sullivan was confirmed as captain in the face of fierce opposition (in the absence of other contenders, he created something of a precedent by opposing himself), but his power was greatly diluted via the

appointment of a record THREE vice-captains, Kevin Bradley, Noel Egan and Martin McGarry. The team had changed considerably from the previous season, mainly as a result of poaching by the other teams in the club jealous of the success and general popularity of the Thirds in this early post-revolutionary phase.

Results in the second half of the season were particularly good, the team had a long unbeaten run and maintained its reputation as the rootinest-tootinest team in town (who still tried to keep the ball on the ground whenever possible).

The team effectively decided the destination of the League by holding the long-time leaders Force et Loisirs to a draw in the last match of the season, allowing our mates Verdi Boys to snatch the title. However, controversy followed the game in the form of persistent rumours, never officially denied, that captain O'Sullivan had been offered (and had accepted) personal inducements to influence the outcome of the Force at Loisirs game. The scandal surrounding the affair is now widely believed to have ultimately forced the shock end of season resignation of the man increasingly referred to as the Bernard Tapie of the club. With Noel Egan, leader of two failed coup attempts during the season now safely out of the way (in charge of the 'ancien regime' element in the club), the way was open for Roddy Feely, the Thirds answer to Roman Abramovich, to pour his Kerrygold millions into the team in the hope of gaining promotion the following year.

Part 3 - The club doubles in size

Season 5

1993-1994

FC Irlande I in Division 2, FC Irlande II in Division 4, FC Irlande III in Division 5

With training also possible on one of the two pitches at Bosstraat the club said goodbye not only to the British School but also to the gravel of Auderghem – which brought a cheer to many wives though shares in Zanussi dropped sharply. The feeling in the club for the new season was one of optimism, though recognising the challenges faced by both teams being in higher divisions.

For the 1st team Dave Verdon took over again for a second stint as captain with the goal of achieving the dream of going all the way from Div 6 to Div 1. Austin Rowan was re-elected 2nd team captain (a club first). For its debut season Liam O'Sullivan was the captain of the 3rd team. The 1st team squad was even stronger than the previous seasons and there was quiet confidence we would have a great season.

Key new recruits included Jean-Louis Vanderperre, Andy Patterson, Walter Wetzelaer and Liam Keys. For the opening game of the new season captain Verdon tried to put the challenge into perspective by stressing how difficult Division 2 would be – only to see the team win its opening game 10-0! (new

boy Vanderperre scoring 5). However, the team lost the next three games (all by a single goal) and, with no matches being played between mid-November and mid-January due to inclement weather, the 1st team were unable to get into any rhythm. They ended the season mid-table having won 8, drawn 8 and lost 9 games. Jean-Louis top scored with 14 goals and Ronan Cashell scored 11. Some compensation was achieved though when they won The Waterloo Tournament for the 3rd time in May.

The 2nd team experienced a similar mid-table season – winning 9 and losing 10 of its 25 games, but with nobody able to score more than 5 goals – John Ludden being top scorer, jointly with Mick Nevin.

Meanwhile in their debut season the 3rd team put forward a most respectable performance winning 7 and drawing 6 of their 23 games. Again, goals were a problem – Seamus Greene top scoring with 6 – but the team gave opportunities to play for FC Irlande. Core players for the 3rd team in 93-94 included Mark Deering, Seamus Greene, Will Egan, Clive D'Santos, John Kenny and Joe Swan

– returning to Brussels after a work absence in Dublin – as well as the skipper Liam O'Sullivan, of course.

As all involved with FC Irlande will know organisation skills is not one of the club's strengths. To overcome one of the perennial headaches – who has the kits? – it was decided to keep the kits at the home venue (once washed, of course!). This plan worked well – until the day that several of the kits were stolen! Thus for half of the season the 2nds and 3rds had to play in shrunken old kits and the idea of a centralised store of kits was abandoned.

For 1993/94 the FC Irlande Players of the Year were Ronan Cashell (1sts), Mick Nevin (2nds) and Liam O'Sullivan (3rds). One landmark achieved was that this was the first season where FC Irlande used more than 50 players – the club was now starting to get big. Big enough to sustain another team and so the Committee decided in summer 1994 to support the creation of another team, the FC Irlande Veterans.

THE VETERANS TEAM: “They said it couldn't be done.....”

Founder-member Noel Egan reminisces on the creation of the Vets team

Those of you old enough to qualify to play veterans football will no doubt remember the infamous Guinness (mis)adventure with “Guinness Light”, a sort of lager-like stout, pulled straight and served immediately. It was their attempt to counteract a swing away from the traditional black stuff. The ad men really went for broke with the catch phrase “they said it couldn’t be done”, and a massive publicity campaign. Now, the strange thing was that the ordinary Josip Savon knew by instinct that it really couldn’t be done, refused to be conned, and the bodiless, tasteless, lifeless substance passed on to the great urinoir in the sky. One up for instinct!

You could say that there has been “Guinness Light”-like moments in the history of the European Communities Gaelic Club and FC Irlande. Whether or not to take part in the Embassy League?; join up with FC Rangers ’78?; enter A.B.S.S.A?; enter TWO teams?; enter THREE teams?..... Instinct played a large part in these decisions, we gave it a lash, and by 1993 had over 60 football-mad playing members, with new and young players joining all the time. Two up for instinct!

All very good, but what about the older players, the vets of campaigns long since forgotten? We could have taken the easy road and let these seasoned warriors surrender and slink off into the night, hamstrings pulled and knees knobbled.....

But No! Instinct would not have it! For a club to survive into middle or even old age, it needs the tried, proven, stout-hearted (and stout bellied!) to stay and participate. And, besides, who else will have the time to coach the youngsters, when instinct tells us it’s time to develop a youth policy? Thus, in the annals of FC Irlande, 1994 is fixed as the year a vets team was entered in A.B.S.S.A.

The team started with a hard-core of about 16 players but, as time as shown, the Vets have been able to recruit new players, as well as to reawaken the interest of older Club members who, for various reasons, no longer play regularly for the other teams.

When creating the Vets the expectation was not to win the World Cup (ed: thankfully ABSSA does not run that, yet...) just to have good sport with the usual F.C.Irlande competitive edge.

Mark my words, these vets are not of the “light” variety; more your traditional “tà siad ag teacht”-type full-bodied, well worth waiting for, and definitely good for you.....).

A postscript by the editor: Noel was a ‘larger-than-life’ character and a key member of the club in its early years. His contribution was great, and it is sad to note that he has suffered serious health problems in the prime of his life.



When FC Irlande entered a Veterans team in 1994 ABSSA’s minimum age to play at this level was 40. It has subsequently been reduced to 35 and then later raised again to its current level of 38 years of age.

**A postscript by the editor:*

Noel Egan was a ‘larger-than-life’ character who was a key member of the club in its early years. His contribution was great, and it is sad to note that he has suffered serious health problems in the prime of his life.

Season 6

1994-1995

*FC Ireland I in Division 2, FC Ireland II in Division 4, FC Ireland III in Division 5
FC Ireland Vets in Division 6*

For the 1994-95 season Pat O'Reilly took over the captaincy again of the first team. However, a bad run early in the season of seven games without a win meant that it was a season of consolidation. For the first time in the team's history the 1sts found goals relatively hard to come by, with one spell of four consecutive 0-0s. Only Ronan Cashell got into double figures with 11 goals – and 6 of these came from the penalty spot. However, the firsts remained tenacious in defence and only lost six games out of 26 all season – and conceded fewer goals than the previous season. One key reason for the solid defence was new recruit Eddie Bradley.

In contrast, the 2nd team – led by Bill Sexton – had a fine season: after a jittery start of not winning in the opening five games and a then record club defeat of 0-10 the team went on a 13 game unbeaten run (including 9 straight wins) and finally ended the season with a record of won 15 drawn 5 and lost only 4 games. The team scored an impressive

51 goals, shared evenly – nobody managing a hat-trick that season! – but with Mark Deering top scorer with 7 goals. Captaincy proved no burden for Bill Sexton as he had his best ever season for FC Ireland, scoring six goals.

The creation of the Vets team impacted negatively on FC Ireland III, who lost the nucleus of their squad (including captain Liam O'Sullivan) to the Vets. Roddy Feely had the unenviable task of rebuilding the team and showed great commitment and patience. However, an end-of-season summary of won 3 drawn 6 and lost 13 was an accurate reflection on the limited resources available. Just as telling was the scoring record of only 13 goals for in 22 games.

In their debut season the Vets, under the leadership of Noel Egan, made a stable, if unspectacular, debut. Of 19 games played the Vets won 9 drew 5 and lost 5 and top scorers were Joe Swan and skinny newcomer Ciaran Mangan, each with six goals – though the way

that both of them would have retold the scoring of each goal it would have seemed more like 60!! However, what was more important than the results was the demonstration that a vets team was a viable proposition – and thus would offer a means of keeping more 'mature' players involved with FC Ireland when their days of playing alongside 18 year olds were over.

For the season 1994-95 the Players of the Year were Eddie Bradley (1sts), Mark Deering (2nds), Sam Hewitt (3rds) and Brian Kelly (Vets) – Brian thus becoming the second Ireland player (after namesake Mick Kelly) to win the coveted trophy twice, and the first for two different teams.

Season 7

1995-1996

*FC Irlanda I in Division 2, FC Irlanda II in Division 4, FC Irlanda III in Division 5
FC Irlanda Vets in Division 6*

For the 1995-96 season Niall Thompson took up the challenge of being 1st team captain. The season would be a good one for the 1sts winning 15 and losing only 5 games out of 26. At one stage, with Andy Patterson as goalie, they had six consecutive wins without conceding a single goal!

For the fourth season in a row Ronan Cashell would get into double figures with his scoring, including a hot streak of scoring in five consecutive matches! This season he was supported by newcomer Max Valleggi with 9 goals. After his successful debut season Bill

Sexton retained captaincy of the 2nd team. However, the team slipped back compared to the previous season and won only 6, drawing 9 and losing 10 games—a bad run of eight games without a victory in September and October ruling out any promotion challenge that season. Goals were at something of a premium – so much so that John Ludden was again top scorer with five!

Alex Johnston replaced Roddy Feely as captain of the 3rd team and was able to put all his professional expertise in working with charities and NGOs to good use by lifting the team to a

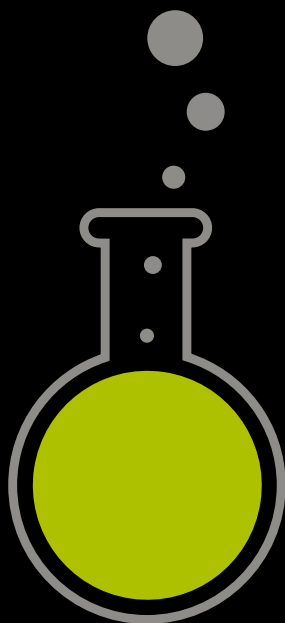
respectable mid-table position, winning 7 and drawing 6 of their 22 games.

For the vets Noel Egan was replaced as skipper by Joe Swan but there too goals dried up for the team – only 22 in 26 games, with midfielder Jim Conway top scorer with six.

That season the players of the year were, for the 1st team Ronan Cashell, Mick Nevin for the 2nd team, Nick Simoncini for the 3rd team and Paddy McEneaney for the Vets team.



FC Irlanda III, 1995-96



Innovation only happens with the right ingredients

At Deloitte, we strongly believe that the right ingredients are crucial for nurturing innovative entrepreneurship.

Our specialists relentlessly strive for new but workable solutions supporting your goals and vision.

That's why we never stand still and are always looking for ways to help our clients take the next step.

Are you ready to step ahead? Visit www.deloitte.com

Season 8

1996-1997

*FC Irlande I in Division 2, FC Irlande II in Division 4, FC Irlande III in Division 5
FC Irlande Vets in Division 6*

For the club's 8th season Niall Thompson was again chosen as 1st team captain. The season was almost, but not quite as good as the previous one – which meant that once again the team was close to the top of the table but without ever being a serious promotion candidate. However, they did again manage to go six consecutive games without conceding a goal and, in Conor O'Kane – a very quiet and shy lad from West Belfast – they had found the heir to Paul McCourt's mantle. Conor was top scorer with 11 goals, supplemented by the ever reliable Ronan Cashell with 10 and Jonas Fischer with nine.

John Ludden became the 2nd team captain and he led them to within a whisker of promotion. The team won 16 and lost only 4 of its 26 games and, in Eivan Ceresi had a striker who bagged 22 goals – the first player to achieve a haul of 20+ goals since Season 2. In total the 2nds scored 74 goals that season – but also managed to concede 36 and, crucially, did not beat either of the eventual top two teams.

Another significant landmark occurred when Niall Harbison turned out for the 2nd team, thus becoming the first son of an FC Irlande player to also play for the club – his father, Ronan, having been in the original 2nd team. FC Irlande had now begun to span the generations!! And Season 96-97 was the first that FC Irlande used more than 100 different players in a season. The time when everybody knew everybody else had long passed!

Peter Walsh was chosen as 3rd team captain but he never got the chance to wear the armband in anger as his job saw him relocate away from Brussels before the season started. Thus in a Gerald Ford sort of way did Michael Mann become captain of the 3rds. But he took his chance and led the team to its best season since formation, with a creditable record of won 11, drew 4 and lost 11 – and with a positive goal difference too! An all-Irish strikeforce of Johan Berghs (9 goals), Götz Hinzelmann (8) and Ben Nupnau (7) playing a big role in the team's good form.

For the Vets Sean Brett took on the leaders role and he must have thought it was a poisoned chalice: entering December the team had won only one game out of 11. Then everything turned around and they won virtually all the remaining games that season! After bagging a solitary goal in 19 games the previous season Ciaran Mangan showed what he could really do by hammering home 16 goals, ably assisted by livewire John Beaddie who scored seven and claimed most of Ciaran's too! In his goal frenzy Ciaran equaled the club record (set by Ronan Cashell the previous season).

At the Player of the Year dinner many of the 'hot shots' were honoured, as Conor O'Kane picked up 1st team Player of the Year, Ben Nupnau for the 3rds and Ciaran Mangan for the Vets. However, the 2nd team broke with ranks and chose Dave Maher as their Player of the Year in spite of Eivan Cerasi's goalfest.

Season 9

1996-1997

*FC Irlande I in Division 2, FC Irlande II in Division 4, FC Irlande III in Division 5
FC Irlande Vets in Division 6*

The 97-98 season saw a new 1st team captain as Walter Wetzelaer took over at the helm. Another stable season ensued – though one match was notable when the 1sts beat Inter Anderlecht by a record score of 17-2 !! Jean-Louis Vanderperre scored no less than 10 of the goals – another record. What seems incredible today is how a team so bad as to concede 17 could actually score two goals! Another man who scored that day – his first for the club - was Warren O'Connor.

After narrowly missing out on promotion the previous season John Ludden decided to have another attempt at leading the team to success. The season started very badly with only one point (and one goal) from the opening three games. But the team were to lose only twice more the

entire season, winning 14 and drawing 8 and, in the process winning a promotion place! Paul Staunton was the team's top scorer with 10 goals, closely followed by Martin Cadogan with 9.

Simon Mordue became captain of the 3rd team and built on the foundations set the previous season. A great start of five consecutive victories could not, alas, be sustained but a season of won 14 drawn 2 and lost 8 meant that this was the best ever season for the 3rds. Twice they won games by ten goal margins and Johan Berghs again top scored, this time impressively by scoring 21 goals.

Seat Brett continued in the position of Vets captain, but the team did not follow up its successful end to the previous season. The vets won only six games out

of 21 that season, though the Beaddie and Mangan double act got 23 goals between them, Beaddie nosing ahead with 12.

Walter Wetzelaer won FC Irlande I Player of the Year – the first instance of a captain winning the trophy. For the 2nd team the winner was Anders Egonsen and Ben Nupnau won the FC Irlande III Player of the Year for the second consecutive year. For the Vets John Beaddie picked up the prize.

Season 10

1998-1999

*FC Irlande I in Division 2, FC Irlande II in Division 3, FC Irlande III in Division 5
FC Irlande Vets in Division 6*

Retaining his captain's armband (and now in possession of a Golden Boot, too) Walter Wetzelaer would have been very disappointed that the team did not progress from the previous season. The team won 7 drew 5 and lost 12, but could only manage 24 goals – Walter himself being the top scorer with 5 goals.

Jonathan Wogan was the new captain of the 2nd team. The team's challenge was to stay in Division 3. The team started positively, winning the opening two games. Unfortunately, the wheels then came off and in the remaining 24 fixtures the 2nds could only muster 2 more wins. In the process they set a club record of

18 defeats in a season, including a run of 8 straight defeats. In the 13 home games the 2nd team could muster only 9 goals. Relegation was the inevitable result.

The 3rd team, under skipper Leo Toole, were severely weakened in season 10 by the promotion to the 1st team of Johan Berghs. Without his goalscoring ability the team declined, and won only five games that season. In addition, they were the first Irish team to forfeit a game 5-0 for fighting when a game they were winning 2-1 was abandoned by the ref. New Vets captain Paul Jarvis had a frustrating season. The team won only 7 games of 20 played and the goals dried

up – midfielder Jim Conway top scoring with only 6 goals.

At the Player of the Year awards Walter Wetzelaer again won the 1st team trophy. Fresh from his 1998 success as 3rd team player Ben Nupnau moved up to the 2nd team –and promptly was chosen as their Player of the Year. For the 3rd team fiery Scot Spencer Harmer won the trophy whilst there was good cheer all round when Jim Conway finally won a richly deserved Veterans Player of the Year trophy.

Season 11

1999-2000

FC Irlanda I in Division 2, FC Irlanda II in Division 4, FC Irlanda III in Division 5

FC Irlanda Vets in Division 6

The beginnings of the FC Irlanda Dark Ages have been traced back to the election of an English guitarist to the role of club President. A combination of a late start to the 1999 AGM, several strong beers and an untimely raising of the hand to offer help – but not in an official capacity – culminated in the election of Trevor Smith as President of FC Irlanda – in an official capacity! And thus it was that FC Irlanda came under the stewardship of a Brit (with an Irish Great Grandmother!) for the years 1999-2002.

The season was a vital one for the club. For the first time, FC Irlanda had started to struggle to put out full teams. Even the first team had struggled the previous season, which had never happened before, while the seconds were relegated and the third team had finished bottom of their division, fortunate that there was no division lower to which they could be relegated. At the AGM that year, there was a proposal to “drop the third team

due to the chronic lack of players”. For a club which had seen only growth until this point, this was worrying.

A huge recruiting drive led by Trevor and a young enthusiastic ABSSA secretary named Roger Cogan brought in a lot of new young players, and the potential crisis was averted. In fact, so successful was the recruitment drive that it was to end with the formation of a fourth team a few years later.....

FC Irlanda I, captained by Niall Thompson, were good enough to merit promotion to Division 1, but just failed to win the one promotion spot, losing out in the final game. One of the team’s ‘galacticos’ at that time was Conor O’Kane, but he never quite mastered the art of diplomacy. As ABSSA Secretary Roger Cogan regularly accompanied him to league disciplinary meetings. On one occasion, when up for a red card after kicking an opponent Roger coached the non-Francophone Conor how to simply

say ‘sorry’. The task was undermined by Conor, who within a minute of the hearing starting, said in a broad Belfast accent that the opponent had ‘dived’, before ensuring that they were absolutely certain what he meant with a diving hand gesture. He got suspended for 3 games.....

FC Irlanda II under Leo Toole and star player Jonas Fischer were definitely too good for Division 4, but failed to get one of the promotion spots on offer. The turds, captained by Adrian McDonagh – who deserves special recognition for taking on this thankless job despite being injured all season – started out with a 7-0 defeat, with the legendary Michael Mann being sent off by a friend of Adrian’s who had volunteered to ref. The game also marked the debut for FC Irlanda of one Denis O’Sullivan, who was in goal. Few realised at the time that letting in 7 goals would probably be his best performance ever for the club. However, over the season things got

Continued..



FC Irlanda I, season 1999-2000

Continued..

better and the core of a decent team began to emerge, with Andreas the core of the defence, and skilful and/or fast players like Robin Chibba and Steve Byrne up front, and occasional appearances by Jim Kenny or Euros Jones whenever Leo released them. That year also so quite a few new young players, including Alan Jones and Carlos Alamo, joined the club, and mixed with experienced players like Jacob Hansen to give the turds quite a strong side eventually. During the season a young red-headed lad called Alan Norton arrived, and the club would never be the same. The Vets had a good season- again under the leadership of Paul Jarvis -, finishing 5th and showing signs of the great season that was to follow.

That summer several of the teams ventured abroad, with varying degrees

of success. The mighty turds re-ignited the tradition of the Turds Tour, and visited Edinburgh, where they were hosted by Alex Johnston and driven around by a Rangers fan named Jock. They played two games of football, some very poor golf and attended a rugby league game. There was probably a lesson to be learned from the fact that of the two football games, they won the first convincingly after downing three pints of beer each, then lost the second equally convincingly when stone cold sober. The immortal song "Stand up if you're Michael Mann!" – perhaps FC Irlanda's greatest contribution to the musical canon – is thought to date from this tour.

The Seconds also went on an amazing tour to Mexico, arranged by Pepe, who was a fantastic host. Among other things,

the team played in a tournament of such high quality that one of the players from the tournament actually scored a goal against Ireland (as in the Republic of Ireland's full international team) a couple of months in a friendly in the USA. And the team also got introduced to the Irish Ambassador.

However, the tour is famous even among those who didn't go due to an association with a player known to those few who could spell his name as Kevin Hemmerijckx. Kevin was heavily involved in helping with the planning, but forgot one tiny little detail – the fact that he needed a passport to go to Mexico – and so was left stranded at the airport as the others took off – leading to the famous t-shirt by designer Matt Graves showing Kevin's ID and the slogan "*Ceci n'est pas un passport*".

Season 12

2000-2001

FC Irlanda I in Division 2, FC Irlanda II in Division 3, FC Irlanda III in Division 5

FC Irlanda Vets in Division 6

The season 2000-01 was one of the best for the club, with three teams challenging for promotion, plus the emergence of a fledgling 4th team (that would formally join ABSSA the following season).

That year the 1st team had an excellent season, winning 15 games and accumulating 49 points, getting them 2nd place in Division 2 and missing out on promotion by only 2 points. Top scorer was Sean O'Connor with 10 goals. However, the team's most unlikely scorer was Alan Norton, who filled in as an emergency sub for one game, came off the bench, scored a spectacular diving header, and was voted Man of the Match – presumably a sympathy vote.

The 2nd team came similarly close – missing out on promotion by only 3 points and ultimately finishing 4th in the table. Steve Byrne bagged 15 goals, and Thomas Morgan – son of Vets legend Dave Morgan (and the only known

recorded Exeter City fan to have played for FC Irlanda) – scored 8. He also scored a further 17 goals for the 3rd team who finished comfortably mid-table. That season Thomas had almost single-handedly led the thirds up the table in a team whose tactics were simply “give the ball to Tom, then try not to get in his way, let him beat a few players and score”. (Thomas failure to win a ‘Player of the Year’ trophy that season can be put down the failure of the two captains to realise that his votes from both teams should have been pooled together.....)

Anybody who wonders what it was like playing for FC Irlanda 2nds that year need only hear the Matt Graves’ memorable description of the ‘opinionated’ Cryans-Staunton midfield axis – “like two barking dogs setting each other off.”

The formation of the fourths, at the initiative of Ciaran Cagney and Alan Norton (see the article by Alan Norton), marked the formal expansion of FC

Irlande beyond the realm of being just a football team. From the outset the creators of the 4th team sought to proudly respect the traditions of FC Irlanda's Gaelic roots by adhering to GAA Rule 23a which forbids “the playing of British sports”. Since their inception the 4th team has successfully demonstrated its ability to play a ball game that resembles nothing like what the British would consider to be football.....

Whereas in 2000-01 both the 1sts and 2nds narrowly missed out on promotion FC Irlanda Vets managed to go one better and did achieve it for the first time in their seven-year existence. Despite losing the opening game, the Vets would lose only two more games the entire season and clinched second place in the league.

The team averaged 3 goals per game, with twenty-five goals coming from the Japanese (!) strikeforce of Sho Okada (16) and Eddie Hanabusa (9), with Liam

Continued..



FC Irl Vets 2000-2001

Continued..

MacGhabhann getting a further 11 goals. (Sho and Eddie were of course, naturalized Irishmen, coming from the famous Clare Irish-Japanese whaling community). Also on the scoresheet for the vets was Ian McConnell – with a career best 2 goals in one season – making him at 53 the oldest player at that time to score for FC Irlande. A key factor in the promotion-winning team was also the midfield of Liam Durack and Mick Nevin – a veritable footballing 'Beauty and the Beast' pairing. Alas, this would be the last season that Liam's silky midfield skills would be seen for FC Irlande as years of wear and tear would on his dodgy knee would necessitate him to hang up the old boots.

The POY Dinner (in the Havana club, of all places) was shocked that year by some

unexpected news – as Trevor, with tears in his eyes, spoke of the decline of our of the club icons, Niall Thompson. His former clear-thinking and decisiveness was slowly being replaced by muddled thinking and forgetfulness. His eyesight was diminishing rapidly to the point where he could barely see the ball. His understanding of the rules of football even began to disappear in a haze of mental confusion. Trevor listed out the distressing symptoms before revealing the feared diagnosis – Niall was becoming an ABSSA referee.

Among the outpouring of sympathy, there was however one voice from the seconds' table which was heard you yell "Niall you miserable blind (expletive deleted)!" The irony of one of the club's greatest collectors of red cards becoming

a ref was not lost on club veterans....!

One final memory of 2000-01 was the recent discovery of a 2001 charity calendar, put together by Matt Graves, with the help of some "willing models" (in the loosest sense of both words) who were posing au nature with the odd glove, flag, football, sporran covering their modesty. Apparently December – featuring President Smith – was a particularly popular month for the single ladies of Brussels.....

HOW THE 4THS WERE BORN

Alan Norton recalls the difficult delivery in 2001 of a new child called FC Ireland IV

In the season of 2000-2001 the club had a lot of surplus players. To meet the insatiable demand for football Kieran Cagney and Alan Norton organised a team to play friendly games. Initially the embryonic 4th team was known as the "5ths" so the Vets would be spared this ignominy.

The happy mix of unwanted and unregistered players included guys who had never played football before, grizzled old vets like Mike Haley who was so skilful he could play on one leg (unfortunately he needed to, his knee was so bad he had often needed assistance getting from the dressing room to the pitch), colourful characters such as Mark Kieran, an excellent player who never let us down but always arrived at the meeting place in a taxi direct from a night on the town. But we were getting a full team out each time and as the season wore on, the case for entering an official FC Ireland 4th team into ABSSA grew stronger ...

This was a very big step for the club, though, and some felt that it was a step too far. The matter was to be resolved at the AGM in a room above the James Joyce Pub. As the committee had a protracted "closed session" upstairs the players of the 4th team had a very open drinking session downstairs. Thus, by the time the meeting was opened to the rest of the club, the prospective 4ths were already merry.

In this atmosphere it was probably unwise for the Committee to opening the meeting with a declaration that the AGM was lacking a quorum and so no important decisions - certainly not one as serious as entering a 4th team into ABSSA in time for the upcoming season - could be taken.

Not surprisingly a heated debate ensued focusing both on the merits of a 4th team and the existence of a constitution which required 30% of members to be present in order for the meeting to be considered quorate. Thankfully, the

Treasurer's report allowed the impasse to be resolved: 90+ people had paid their club subscriptions – once it was identified that more than 30% of these people were present the prospective 4ths were quick to count the people in the room, do their sums, and declare the meeting quorate. With the meeting now in a position to take decisions, a vote was taken and a large majority opted for FC Ireland IV to play in ABSSA in season 2001-02.

Come September 2001 the first ever 4th team to take to the field for a league match numbered only 8 players, but included FC Ireland legends Niall Thompson (thereby becoming the first – and possibly the only – human to play for all 5 FC Ireland teams) and Niko Simola who scored (thus becoming a legend as the first player to score for the 4ths). The first season was challenging but FC Ireland IV did win a few games. The second season started in the same vane until an outstanding bunch of young players -- christened "Westlife" -- joined.

From these beginnings the 4ths have gone from strength to strength, underpinning the 3rd team (i.e. freeing the 3rd team from the obligation to pick them) which arguably helped them to get promotion to Division 4, with probable knock-on effects for the 2nd and 1st teams. In addition, FC Ireland IV has been the breeding ground for future captains of the 2nds and 3rds: Dave Glynn, Gregor MacDonald, Rob Jenks, Jeff Bridoux.

As the seasons went by the points tallies have increased, culminating in the glorious season of 2006-2007 when Jeff Bridoux led the 4ths to an unprecedented 21 points. The 4th team is still primarily a team for those who enjoy the fun of football. However, if one compares the fledgling years of the 3rd and even the 2nd teams then they took time to build into competitive teams. The path for the 4th team is still upwards!

Part 4 - Promotion to the 1st Division - TWICE!

Season 13

2001-2002

*FC Irlande I in Division 2, FC Irlande II in Division 4, FC Irlande III in Division 5,
FC Irlande IV in Division 5, FC Irlande Vets in Division 6a*

The first team had recently lost Conor O’Kane – making the dressing room a much quieter place - but in 2001 they received a boost when a member of the Dublin senior football panel (Gaelic football, that is) joined the club. Mick O’Keeffe soon showed at training what is meant by the term ‘being fit’ meant. He was pretty handy with a football too, and for a brief period it seemed like he would single-handedly lead the 1st team to the Division 2 title. However, midway through the season he was called back to Dublin and without him the team’s promotion challenge fizzled out.

One fond memory of that season is of a dive by Gerry Sealy – one of the most naturally talented footballers to have played for FC Irlande – in deepest January that won us a penalty and got us a 1-0 win: after 13 seasons FC Irlande had finally figured out how ABSSA referees view games! (Not that the number of Irish red cards has diminished over time....)

Those who were around at the time

may remember this year for the arrival and departure of the mercurial Sorely McCaughey. Sorley had a rarely seen and underestimated ability for a defender in ABSSA – the ability to talk about an opposition player’s mother in fluent Arabic, while simultaneously punching this player in the kidneys over a protracted period. He instigated at least two near riots that season, one of which persuaded the referee to blow full time 5 minutes early. Brilliant defender; journeyman timekeeper; enthusiastic disco dancer. Even the Dennis Wise-like Eoghan Colfer, another new arrival that season, felt sufficiently concerned about Sorley’s safety to tell him that ‘you need to look after yourself’ on a pitch.

Notable events for the second team include probably the single most inebricated performance by any player in the history of the club, when Mark Kieran turned up for a game so much the worse for wear after the previous night that he just sat down in the middle of the field and couldn’t be persuaded

to move. There are also rumours that FC Irlande II captain, Paul Staunton, was sent off in one game for not being fully aligned with some of the referee’s decisions, though this has not been substantiated.

The Third team was captained by Frenchman Laurent Michot. Whilst he had a club-loyalty and attitude that was more Irish than most of the Irish players, his French accent meant that team talks from him were glorious sights to behold, as his passionate exhortations were frequently met by blank stares of incomprehension. He was also surely the goalkeeper who spent the largest fraction of his time in the opposition half of the field – but the fact that he won the 3rd team Player of the Year suggests it must have been effective.

The fourth team, in their first season, showed a combination of fiery enthusiasm and unparalleled incompetence, leading to a finish in the bottom 3 of the bottom division

Continued..

Continued..

– a statistic which was to be repeated several times. Brian Mahon was elected as the least incompetent of the group – his Player of the Year award represented scant reward for many fine tackles on very mucky pitches.

During the summer of 2001 star goalie Niko Simola suffered a very serious motorbike accident. Thankfully, he made an almost complete recovery, and FC Ireland IV were very fortunate to have his services for a few games (as an outfielder) as he returned to fitness – Niko playing on the fourths was a bit like Shaquille O’Neal playing for the Clare-Galway under-15 basketball team. Totally outplayed all over the field, the team plan would be to get the ball to Niko, he’d hold off about 7 tacklers with his good arm and lay off a perfect pass to someone in front of goal – who of course would invariably miss. It was also a novelty to have a player who could hit 80-yard goalkicks more accurately than we could hit 10-yard passes. Indeed, it was Niko who scored the first ever goal

for FC Ireland IV – in a 1-6 defeat, with only seven players: five of whom were brutal, the remaining two being Niall Thompson and Niko.

Nobody can remember what the Vets did this season – the third under the despotic reign of Paul Jarvis. However, it is reasonable to assume that there were copious quantities of beer and crisps consumed whilst Ciaran Mangan would have been involved in the occasional on-field scuffle....

Those who were present at the end of the 2001-02 season probably remember the vicious power struggle within the club, as the deceptively mild-mannered Roger Cogan tried to gain total control. In fact, Roger had taken over from the irreplaceable Niall Thompson as first team captain the previous year. And now the Club needed someone to take over from Trevor Smith, who was standing down as President after three hard-working years in the role. In the absence of any other volunteer, Roger

agreed to take on this role in addition to the first team captaincy. It wasn’t the first time he’d taken on two committee roles at once, so he knew it would mean effectively devoting 80% of his non-working life to FC Ireland. Luckily he had a very patient girlfriend.

Season 14

2002-2003

FC Irlande I in Division 2, FC Irlande II in Division 4, FC Irlande III in Division 4, FC Irlande IV in Division 5, FC Irlande Vets in Division 6a

It is rumoured that the new Club president (or was it the old, outgoing one?) destroyed all the records of the season 2002-03, as part of the Club's new policy to adhere to data protection regulations. However, research shows that for the FC Irlande 1st team, 2002/3 was 'the year that got away' – the Firsts had a very strong team, where the only missing link was a regular goalscorer.

The number of points lost through an inability to score goals in tight games was heartbreaking. Nonetheless the season proved to be a good foundation for new 1st team captain Mark Cryans to build on. Memorable moments from the year include a last-minute winner against at home, where celebrations were cut short when everyone realized that Damian Phillips and an FC Gast player and were rolling around on the ground fighting about 50 metres from the action - thankfully the referee didn't disallow the goal – and a last minute equalizer by sub Sean O'Connor in bottomless mud away to Brussels LTC – rumour has it that Sean was the only player tall enough to see over the top of the mud.

That season also saw the fastest goal ever scored by a substitute – in a game vs FC Centre. Whilst play was stopped for an FC Irlande free kick 20 metres out a team change was made. Stevie Byrne ambled onto the field. The crowd pondered aloud "Will he? Won't he take the free kick?" Another man might have

hesitated, but Stevie's confidence knew no bounds. He stepped up and with his first touch of the ball, after being on the pitch only a matter of seconds, he shot and scored!

The 1st team player of the year in 2002-03 was that most Irish of Spaniards, David Martin Garcia, a player who has been at the core of the first team's success for most of this millennium.

FC Irlande II again failed to get promoted in what was becoming a depressing trend – but few were aware that the wily captain Jim Kenny was laying plans for a full-frontal assault on the title the following season – at least, during those moments in which he wasn't trying to devise a strategy to get Anna Kournikova to join as club physio and masseuse.

The third team was captained by Gregor MacDonald, but other than that, their season was surely the least memorable in the history of the club – in the very literal sense of the term memorable – since not one surviving player can remember anything at all about that season – not even who was player of the year. This fact is made even more remarkable by the fact that the Turds actually won promotion in 2002-03 (a fact only deduced from the team's appearance in Division 4 the following season). With a team containing such future seconds and first stars as Paul Gavin ("The Rock") and John O'Donnell,

the 3rd team apparently ran away with the division – and that same year they got to the final of a special Abssa cup, only to lose on penalties. However, celebrations must have been so good that nobody remembers a thing.

The season 2002-03 also saw the fourth team inheriting not one but two sons of founder-members of FC Irlande - Cian MacEneaney, son of Paddy, and Danny Verdon, son of Dave. Thankfully, both were more astute than their fathers at goal scoring! Opposing teams dismissed the wiry Danny and the diminutive Cian, but soon found themselves torn apart by their speed and skill. With any kind of half decent support, they could probably have got the 4th team into the top half of the table, but there's only so much two players can do. Not surprisingly one of them – Danny - was voted 4th team Player of the Year.

Little is known of the happenings of the Vets team in 2002-03, other than after 4 seasons in control Paul Jarvis was overthrown in a coup led by Terry Waite. But it can be assumed that for the Vets Ciaran Mangan scored some goals, got a few yellow and red cards and the team generally had an enjoyable time.

Season 15

2003-2004

FC Irlande I in Division 2, FC Irlande II in Division 4, FC Irlande III in Division 4, FC Irlande IV in Division 5, FC Irlande Vets in Division 6a

Forensic analysis of an old kit bag reveals that season 2003-04 was a major one for FC Irlande II. The team went the entire season undefeated – drawing eight games and winning the rest – and thus won promotion. Star players behind the success were Enda Rice, Frainc Reid, John O'Donnell and Paul Gavin in midfield with Mark Law top joint scorer with Frainc. The actual title-winning goal was scored by Danny Verdon (much to the envy of his goal-hungry father). Enda was the Player of the Year for the team that season. The team had been getting closer and closer to promotion, but it had begun to look like it would never happen – however under Paul Staunton's inspirational leadership, there was no stopping them this year, no prisoners taken and no holds barred. When asked for his reminiscences on the season, Paul was typically down-to-earth: "The real highlight for me that season was our tour to the Ballyjamesduff pork festival. We ate a lot of pork..."

There were great celebrations and outpourings of joy when finally Paul got to hand out the championship medals at the POY dinner that year – although the strong cocktails drunk before the dinner may have played a small part in this.

For the 1st team Mark Cryans took over team captaincy. One of Mark's first tasks was to learn how to write the name Jan Van Zanten Veldhuijzen clearly and legibly into a 3x1cm box on the ABSSA 'pink sheet' (or risk incurring a 0-5 defeat). Season 2003-04 was a positive one for the 1st team.

They had a strong nucleus of players to build a team around - Warren O'Connor, Liam (The Pegs) Keys, Ben Gannon, Nico Simola, Damian Phillips, Gerry Sealy, Chris Jones, Jan the Van, Stevie Byrne, David Martin Garcia, Rad Cherif, Ronan Cashell and captain Cryans. The team started the season well, winning the first three games, but a bad October saw a miserable run of draws mixed with the odd defeat which seriously dented their promotion ambitions. However, consistent results during winter saw the Firsts climb up to third place, behind Besace and Brussels LTC – with both to play in the last months of the season. However, fate conspired against FC Irlande I.

The game at home to Besace was a mudbath that should never have been played and 0-0 was the inevitable result of the farce. The following week they lost 2-3 at Brussels LTC, but only after the game was held up 30 minutes when an opponent freakishly broke his chin against railings at the side of the pitch – they then proceeded to score the winner when the injury time was finally played.

So, a final placing of 3rd place was very respectable, and a great platform to build on for the next season. For captain Cryans the most memorable game being a 5-0 victory against Suisse. David Martin was again 1st team Player of the Year, and Stevie Byrne was top scorer.

Not much more footballing information remains from that season, as Roger's plan to remove all traces of footballing

activities during his presidency was surprisingly effective. The unreliable scraps of shredded paper that have survived from this time suggest that the turds, in their first season in Division 4, did rather well under the captaincy of Alex Kasterine, with cricket-playing Englishman David Glynn winning 3rd team Player of the Year (allegedly because of his red-headed Irish complexion).

The Fourths experimented off-the-field by turning themselves into a workers co-operative and having four of the players - Brian Forbes, Henry Dobbin, Kieran Cagney and Denis O'Sullivan – all sharing the role of captain. It was said of the four that if all the football incompetence at one of their captains' meetings could have been harnessed for fuel, global warming could have been averted. Predictably enough, the experiment ended in failure, with the highlight of the season being the moment when co-captain Henry, in an attempted to trap the ball, accidentally stood on it and fell on his arse during the warm-up. Alan Norton won the Player of the Year by default.

Of the Vets second season under the schoolmasterly tutorship of Terry Waite all that is known is that Dave Byrne won Player of the Year.

Season 16

2004-2005

FC Irlanda I in Division 2, FC Irlanda II in Division 3, FC Irlanda III in Division 4, FC Irlanda IV in Division 5, FC Irlanda Vets in Division 6a

Few records exist of season 2004-05 and some experts' feel that the entire season was lost due to global warming, which, as noted above, could have been prevented. What is known by a process of elimination is that the Roger Cogan dynasty was finally toppled by the only slightly more modest Paul Staunton dynasty. Paul satisfied himself with the presidency and only being captain of the (newly-promoted) second team.

However, archaeological analysis has revealed that, under the continued captaincy of Mark Cryans, the Firsts finally achieved what has always been the club's ambition – promotion of FC Irlanda I to ABBSA Division 1 !!! However, it true FC Irlanda style this was no simple task. The 1st team finished second place

in their division (though with more points than either of the other two teams winning their respective Division 2s) and thus, frustratingly seemed to have missed out on the solitary promotion place in their division.

However, disappointment turned to elation when Division 1 champions Big Red, decided to quit the league (after being champions for several successive seasons), freeing up one extra promotion spot – which was given to FC Irlanda I as the best runner-up in division 2. The manner of the promotion – confirmed in some random weekly update during the summer by ABBSA – sadly caused the club celebrations of this momentous event to be more muted than the achievement warranted. Nonetheless,

promotion to the top tier of ABBSA fifteen seasons after FC Irlanda joined Division 6 had been the culmination of a dream for the club's founding fathers. But it is appropriate to let the captain tell the story of the season:

FC Irlande make it into ABSSA Division 1!

Promotion-winning captain Mark Cryan's reminisces on the historic 2004-05 season

In the 2003-04 season the FC Irlande 1sts came close to winning promotion to ABSSA Division 1. For the following season the squad was strengthened with step-ups from the seconds (Alec Elliott and Enda Rice) and fourths (!)(livewire Emmett Devine), plus the return of the Great Dane Christian Rasmussen. The 3-5-2 system had been deployed and worked on over the pre-season and a 6-0 destruction of perennial first division inhabitants La Lorraine in pre-season saw us start the season in great spirits.

As in the previous season we got off to a flyer again, winning all our first three games comfortably. The fourth game saw us wobble against Centre FC. With a makeshift back 3 we found ourselves 3 goals down within the first 10 minutes. Remarkably we were back on level terms just after half-time from a fantastic Niko Simola goal. Alas the decisive winner did not come.

Another notable game that season saw us record a 10-0 victory over Auderghem Amicable. Stevie Byrne netted 5 whilst Sean O'Connor got 4. I could have got 4 but strikers being strikers meant that their profligacy resulted in other chances going begging. It is worth noting that the defence picked up the majority of Man of the Match votes and the honour of paying for the drinks.

It was shaping up to be a tough season and again we found ourselves in a three-horse race, with a new kid on the block in the form of Goalois, as well as our old adversaries Brussels LTC II. However by the Christmas break there seemed to be

no contest as Goalois had a seemingly unassailable lead at the top of the league, 10-points ahead of us in 2nd place and with only 9 games to be played. Brussels LTC was on our tails, one point behind.

The first match of the New Year saw us face Goalois on their home pitch. We had nothing to lose but everything to gain, but as luck would have it we were also missing some regular bodies. Sean O'Connor was teased away from his basketball fame and a new boy Michael Hough was captured from his impressive exploits with the seconds. Goalois had only lost one game all season - an unheralded 3-2 loss to our good selves and were a fantastic side.

The game was ferocious and I can remember the first 10 minutes seeing us under extreme pressure. We withstood the onslaught and then turned the game on its head. With rapid fire we went in at the break 3 goals to the good. I had never seen a dressing room with such fire at half-time. The second half started and we were under attack from the start. The defence stood strong and we sprung them again.

After that we had broken them. With the most complete performance from an Irlande team I had ever seen we added a fifth. 5-0! What a result! That evening after the game I took a call from Gerry Sealy. It took a long while before one of the greatest players to have played for FC Irlande would believe that we had won so handsomely. To do it without his unique talent was even more amazing. There have been massive highs and results since, which I am so happy to have been

part of but this stands out as the best ever performance for me.

This victory got us back on track and had sent out a marker to Goalois that we were good enough to push them all the way. The following week saw us take on another team that we had got to know over the years, Pharma. It also saw the first appearance of one of the best ever FC Irlande players, Sigve Dyrnes. Unfortunately we suffered a 0-1 loss, gifting them a goal in the first 5 minutes. One way traffic for the rest of the game did not pay dividends, even after the now-talismanic Sigve's introduction.

With the league almost done and dusted and with memories of the game against Goalois on our minds we set upon ensuring that everyone knew we were good enough to beat anyone in the league. That we did, rattling off 7 wins in a row. We dispatched teams with ease until the second last game of the season when we faced New Arquois, a truly horrible non playing outfit. 0-0 was the score until minutes to go when Stevie Byrne (I think) notched the winner. We had all but taken the season to the last match.

Due to the weather that year, Goalois had the chance to play Brussels LTC II midweek to clinch the title before the last run of matches the following weekend. On a Wednesday night in Woluwe St Pierre, 10 hardy Irlanders turned out to watch Goalois clinch the title against the third best team. Goalois went 1 up before the splinters from the railway sleepers

could embed themselves in our cheeks. With a makeshift LTC eleven it looked unlikely that the sun would shine, but with 10 minutes to go the unlikely happened and LTC got an equaliser. So down to the last game of the season it was, and the pressure was on Goalois.

The last game of the season arrived and a win for us combined with a loss for Goalois would take us to our first Second Division championship. But Goalois had the arrogance to wipe away Pharma 5-0. We held up our side of the bargain to retain our winning streak and come in a worthy second. Rad Cherrif won the Player of the Year trophy and Stevie Byrne was top scorer with a very impressive tally of 28 goals.

This finish paid unexpected dividends as long-running ABBSA Division 1 champs New Red pulled out of the league, freeing a place for the best second place team - FC Irlande I. We had won promotion! However, this means of promotion was an anti-climax. Whilst the players each had an individual sense of achievement and relief that first team football was for the first time on the agenda for the First team and the club, there was no fanfare or celebration. To win by default is never nice, irrespective of how fantastically bloody brilliant the achievement was.



The promotion-winning FC Irlande I team of 2005-2006

Season 17

2005-2006

(FC Irlande I in Division 1, FC Irlande II in Division 3, FC Irlande III in Division 4, FC Irlande IV in Division 5, FC Irlande Vets in Division 6a)

For its inaugural season in Division 1 the 1st team strengthened its squad with the addition of Peter Somers, Kieran De Groote and James Thomas.

However, they had a very tough start to their Division 1 campaign. If they had been beaten off the park, that might have been less frustrating – however, what happened was that they conceded only 5 goals in their first 4 games – and yet lost all four of them. Part of this was the realisation of the gap in quality between the strikers in Division 1 and Division 2, but there was also just a lot of bad luck. It was game seven of the season before the 1st registered the first-ever FC Irlande victory in Division 1

and the team was now at the foot of the table. But the team then strung a series of good results together and were able to claw themselves up from the bottom.

However, they were unable to get enough good results to safely pull away from the relegation zone. The team went into the final game of the season 4th from bottom, but playing at home against the team directly below them (Gast). Irlande just needed a draw, but again nothing went in the team's favour on the day, and a lucky looping header for Gast from a corner 10 minutes from the end got them a 1-0 win and sent the first team back down to Division 2. On the plus side the club now knew it was

good enough to play in Division 1, but were back in the position of having to win our Division to get there again.

The Firsts were not the only FC Irlande team to taste relegation in 2005-06. A few of the club's founding fathers were playing for a Vets team that got relegated, in somewhat similar style to the First team – losing games by the odd goal and generally lacking a cutting edge. In inauspicious start for Vets team factotum and general manager Paddy Corr in his first full season as team supremo.

Season 18

2006-2007

(FC Irlande I in Division 2, FC Irlande II in Division 3, FC Irlande III in Division 4, FC Irlande IV in Division 5, FC Irlande Vets in Division 6)

As is their habit ABSSA decided to confuse everybody by announcing an upheaval of their pyramid system of divisions for season 2007-8. This meant a scrapping of a third Division 2 and a cascading downwards of teams – so lots more relegation places in 2006-07

Back in the to-be-shrunken Division 2 the First team did well, losing only 3 of 23 games. However, they drew a remarkable 11 games, many that should have been won easily. This meant that winning the single promotion (to regain their rightful division one status) was not a realistic goal. However, with almost half the division getting relegated as part of the ABSSA restructuring it was important to finish high in the division. Thankfully, FC Irlande I was safely at the top end of the table, and eventually ended in a dog-fight for third place.

The Seconds had a tough season. After gaining promotion to Division 3 back in 2003-4, it seemed as if the 2nd team had solidified its status there. But after a good start, the team had series of poor results in mid-season, and with 5 teams out of 14 going down, the team was struggling to avoid relegation.

Having fought so hard to gain promotion the club was determined not to let FC Irlande II's division 3 status slip away. In the end, the power of the club helped the team through, as with the help of some guest players from the firsts it got the required points from the final games to guarantee safety.

The turds had a very good season. Captain Rafa Martinez Niera introduced a Columbian style of play, a TurdKey revolution complete with website and TurdKey TV, and recruited a whole new group of young and talented players to the club – in addition to the diversity they brought to the club, these players also produced the highest ever finish for the turds – 4th place and for much of the season they were in the promotion race.

Even the Fourths had their best season ever: not that that's saying much... After an inauspicious start of 7 straight defeats, the team hit form just when all hope was lost, and under the leadership of Jeff Bridoux, amassed an impressive 20 points in the next 15 games, to move out of the bottom 3. The hope was that this season might have represented a great turnaround from being just

combative to being truly competitive ... but the future was to show that this was somewhat over-optimistic.

The Vets too had a fine season, and ended up fighting for 3rd place in a very competitive division. The two promotion spots were unfortunately quickly wrapped up by two extremely strong teams. However all the signs of progress were there.

One remarkable phenomenon about season 18 was that of captains of FC Irlande 1 to 4, not only was there no Irishman, but in fact none of them were even native English speakers. Perhaps the truly remarkable aspect of this is that this fact passed totally unobserved at the time – in FC Irlande, the only thing that matters is a player's loyalty to the club, and everyone is welcomed with equally open arms. In fact, you wouldn't find anyone more proud to be FC Irish than David, John, Rafa or Jeff!

Season 19

2007-2008

(FC Irlande I in Division 2, FC Irlande II in Division 3, FC Irlande III in Division 4, FC Irlande IV in Division 5, FC Irlande Vets in Division 6)

2007-08 promised to be a tough season. In true ABBSA-style they had decided to reformat the divisions by eliminating one of the three Division 2's at the end of the previous season. This was done by relegating the 15 weakest teams from Division 2 and consolidating the remaining teams into two much stronger divisions. But the effect also permeated down through the divisions as division 3 had to make room for the teams coming down from Division 2 by also relegating five of the previous season's weaker teams, and not just the usual one or two. And ditto in Division 4. The consequence of all this change was that Divisions 2, 3 and 4 would be stronger – not good news for the FC Irlande I who had just been relegated to Division 2, whilst FC Irlande II and III had just recently been promoted, and were still finding their footing in Divisions 3 and 4 respectively – so this new situation presented a real challenge for the Irish teams to maintain their divisional status.

The first team – back in Division 2 - were hoping to bounce back up as champions, and the responsibility to make that happen fell to the new captain, Alec Elliott. The seconds were captained by Gregor McDonald, while the thirds were captained by Rob Jenks.

The Vets too were hoping for a promotion, captained as ever by the non-playing but ever-philosophising Paddy Corr, while the 4ths, under the captaincy of Damien Hegarty were hoping to build on a couple of surprisingly decent seasons when they'd been competitive in most games and reached 20+ points.

The season turned out to be memorable. The first team made a great start, and coming up to Christmas were in second place behind a team called Nahda. Irlande then played them in back-to-back games and they brought spectacular

wins – 3-0 away and 5-1 at home, which put Irlande to the top of Division 2. In the New Year, the FC Irlande I never looked back and put together a remarkable run of sixteen consecutive wins – of which ten were by at least 3 goal margins! Domination on an unprecedented scale! The team had the Division 2 title sewn up in record time (February) following victory over Barca Jette and eventually won the league by a record number of points (16).

The team played a brand of football that blew away the opposition. It was built around a very solid defence – conceding only 16 goals all season, backed by Will Parker in goal (often idle, but there when needed), and a strong midfield. But what was new this season was the strikers – Ross Grainger, Pauli LePisto and Sigve Dyrnes formed a strike-force that no defence could handle – and for once, FC Irlande was able to turn dominating performances into dominating scorelines with boring regularity, clocking up 90 goals in the season. Their matches were a joy to watch ... unless you were an opposition goalkeeper. It was like the FC Irlande 1st team of the early 1990s – though at a much higher level.

It was the Club's first ever Division 2 Championship, and the team's winning streak was also recognized by ABSSA who awarded the club the honour of their special merit award for achievement in the league.

The seconds and thirds had difficulties in the early parts of the season, leaving both in potential relegation trouble at Christmas. From there, the respective captains adopted two very different approaches. The seconds decided to start winning games, and started the New Year playing like champions, eventually putting together a run of wins

and draws that got them up to fifth place at one point, and meant that they were never in danger of relegation.

The 3rd team opted for a more exciting route. At one point they were ten points adrift of relegation safety. However, a truly remarkable end to the season saw them fight off relegation, with a victory against 3rd bottom Sparta Scheut in their second last game ensuring both Irlande's safety and relegation for Scheut. This remarkable turnaround, along with the championship title won by the 1st team, made for a very memorable end to the season.

The Vets started their season in disappointing fashion, leaving themselves too far behind the two leading teams to have a real chance. Like the seconds, they came out after Christmas in great form, and after a 5-0 drubbing at the league champions Tubifoot (who dropped only 2 points all season) on the opening weekend in January the Vets then went the remainder of the season unbeaten - form that they would take into the next season – to finish a most respectable 4th place. But, more importantly, the Vets now had a belief in their ability to do better.

The fourths' continued their slow but steady improvement in terms of competitiveness, but this did not bring an improvement in league points. Probably their main contribution to the club was the fact that their two fullbacks, Seamus McCarthy and Conchur de Barra, owned seven pubs in Brussels between them – so we were never short of places to celebrate – indeed the celebration on the day the firsts clinched the title lasted well into Sunday morning and took several of these along the route, as best anyone can remember!

The record-breaking, award winning FC Irlanda I squad of 2007-08 was:

Alec Elliott
Christophe Gomez
Chris Jones
Christian Rasmussen
David Martin
Enda Rice
Eoghan Colfer

Emmet Devine
Frederik Welslau
Jan Velhuijzen
Kieran De Groote
Mark Cryans
Pauli Le Pisto
Pete Sommers

Radouane Cherif
Ross Grainger
Stephen O'Neill
Sean O'Connor
Sigve Dyrnes
Stephen De Deckker
Will Parker



Part 5 - The club comes of age - and wins the league!

Season 20

2008-2009

(FC Irlande I in Division 1, FC Irlande II in Division 3, FC Irlande III in Division 4, FC Irlande IV in Division 5, FC Irlande Vets in Division 6)

2008-09: the twentieth season of FC Irlande playing in ABSSA. But in September few would have realised how exciting the season would be.

After the disappointment of immediate relegation in their inaugural season in Division 1 the 1st team were determined to make a better showing the second time around. This proved to be something of an understatement. Following Alec Elliot's success as promotion-winning captain he continued in the role for a second season. Just as importantly, the team picked up where it left off at the end of the previous season and playing some really great football were top of ABSSA Division 1 at Christmas. The title race would be a 4-horse race between FC Irlande I, Jefke, La Lorraine, and FC Royal Brussels British (the defending champions).

In a see-saw season each of the four teams had its moments and FC Irlande 1sts had a series of frustrating draws and painful 2-1 defeats which saw them slip off the top of the table, but nonetheless remained in contention. By the last game of the season the Firsts were lying in 3rd place, but only one point behind both Jefke and La Lorraine. Alas, it was too much to hope that both would slip up on the last day and so the championship was not to be in the club's 20th season. But FC Irlande I did the club proud and proved that they could compete at the highest level. The bad memories of season 18 were exorcised.

The other success story of the season was FC Irlande Vets. The appearance of a classy Dutch defender by the name of Arthur Verheij, plus the eligibility of the youthful-looking Warren O'Connor as a veteran greatly strengthened the team. Having not lost a game since the first weekend in January of the previous season they continued this unbeaten

streak into April 2009 – a run of 34 games. By Christmas the Vets were six points clear at the top of the table – and even extended it to eight points – but the season started to go pear-shaped when they conceded 4 goals in a 6-4 win against perennial bottom of the table Ramblers. The team became jittery, goals dried up and where once there had been confident victories there were now jittery draws – and eventually defeats. The Vets slipped down to third but came into the last game of the season in Stockel needing a draw against promotion rivals St Georges to get promoted.

Sometimes an entire season can seem to turn on a single moment – with one minute to go the Vets were trailing by 3 goals to 2 when they were awarded a penalty. If it goes in Irlande remain top of the table. If it doesn't St Georges go to the top, and Irlande drop to 3rd place. After what seems like an eternity (due to the not surprisingly negative reaction from the awarding of the penalty by St Georges, including a red card) Warren O'Connor coolly stepped up to the spot – and blasted the ball over the bar....

Admittedly, Warren had taken a rather theatrical dive to win the pen, so perhaps justice was done. As a result the Vets would tie for 1st place but miss out on promotion because of fewer victories. Nonetheless, with only 2 defeats in the season and a haul of 56 points this was a record-breaking season for the Vets. When the chips were down off the pitch Dave Verdon would eat them – and he also set a then club record in surpassing Ian McConnell as being the oldest FC Irlande player to score, aged 55. Liam Keys finished top scorer for the vets with 8 goals – impressive when considering how many games he either limped off or was sent off. Vets Player of the Year was Alan Dell – the first Brummie to pick up

such an award from FC Irlande!

FC Irlande's 2nd team, with Chris White taking on the almost impossible job of marshalling this diverse group of strong personalities, were mid-table for most of the season. Sometimes the team played to its potential and would be world beaters, whereas on other days it just wouldn't happen. With 4 games to go, the 2nds beat the league leaders 2-0 – and then managed to lose the final three fixtures – two of them against teams below them. This run, combined with some improbable results by the teams at the bottom, meant that after the final game there was much nail-biting as all the results were tabulated. In the end FC Irlande 2 avoided relegation by one place (and with the same number of points as one of the relegated teams, too).

The Third team started well under the leadership of Giorgio Grandi – a man of many nationalities of which Irish was not one – had a period of poor results but recovered after Christmas, winning four games in a row in February. Giorgio left for Italy, and Jeff Bridoux took over, leading the team to a very respectable fifth place finish. The Fourth team developed an interesting trait shown by many FC Irlande teams over time of playing very well against the top teams – often ending in narrow defeats – and then playing badly in the games they could have been expected to win. This led to a points haul of only 12 for the season.

The other big development this year was the re-birth of FC Irlande Ladies FC – for full details of ladies football in FC Irlande, see part 6 of this history.

Season 21

2009-2010

(FC Irlande I in Division 1, FC Irlande II in Division 3, FC Irlande III in Division 4, FC Irlande IV in Division 5, FC Irlande Vets in Division 6)

Following the decision by KV Woluwe to end the stay of FC Irlande at Everestraat the club started its 21st season at a new home venue, namely the FC Nossegem ground at the "Radar Vlieghaven" (Airport Radar) pitches, the name giving a hint at its location adjacent to Zaventem Airport.

For the 1st team the season started badly – perhaps needing time to adjust to playing on the new home venue - but skipper Alec Elliott soon steadied the ship and the team went on an unbeaten run from November until the end of the season. With a third placed finish in Division I FC Irlande I achieved a club best. The foundations were laid for a challenge to the title the following year.....

It things were starting to look good for the First team the 2009/10 season turned out to be a truly special year for the 2nd team. Having survived relegation on the final day of the previous season, the 2nds enjoyed a dramatic turnaround in fortunes. In what was to become known as the „O’Broin Revolution“, the team took Division 3D by storm.

Stevie Byrne led the way up front scoring 13 goals (despite spending almost half the season suspended), while at the other end Nick Simoncini kept an impressive 10 clean sheets! In truth though, this was a team which will be remembered for the strength and character of the

collective. During the season there were 17 different goal-scorers, 16 different men of the match, the team scored 69 goals and conceded only 29.

The team played an exciting, attacking brand of football and with a reputation for entertaining as well as nerve-racking matches, the second team enjoyed something of a cult following. Perhaps the best remembered match was a sensational comeback at home to British Utd. Three nil down with only 20 minutes to go the 2nd team refused to give in and with encouragement from Gregor’s trumpet and some deafening support, they completed the unlikeliest of comebacks. Goals from super-sub Ollie, Dave Barrett and the mercurial Orhan ensured the team remained unbeaten at home. “Fortress Nossegem” was born.

The team never really looked back after this game, displaying the same character and never-say-die attitude on a number of crucial occasions. FC Irlande II were unbeaten in the final 11 games, and conceded only 8 goals after Christmas. In true club style the 2nds chose not to

clinch the title early thanks to suffering a bizarre forfeit away to BUFC (despite winning 5-1) and Ollie missing a last minute penalty on the penultimate weekend. As a result the season went right to the wire. Away from home, but with every FC Irlande team watching from the sideline (not to mention the team in 2nd place), the team put in a champions performance. Two goals from Angel and a sensational personal effort from Danny Verdon helped ensure a 3-0 victory and the title!

The season proved unexceptional for the 3rds and 4th teams – though FC Irlande IV did have the pleasure to savour some of the promotion glory of the 2nd team by also playing their last game at the same venue. But the teams introduced several new players to the club, most notably George Niland who, over time, would rise to play with the Seconds.

Following their promotion winning season the Vets found football in the higher Division 6C (equivalent to 2nd division) tough. Team supremo Paddy Corr set consolidation as the teams target, which they achieved. However, at the season end ABSSA decided to create an additional league in Division 3 and so decided to relegate more than the requisite bottom two from the 2nd divisions, so the Vets were relegated anyway!! Such are the vagaries of football in ABSSA sometimes....



FC Irlande IV, 2008-2009

Season 22

2010-2011

(FC Irlande I in Division 1, FC Irlande II in Division 2, FC Irlande III in Division 4, FC Irlande IV in Division 5, FC Irlande Vets in Division 6)

If Seasons 20 and 21 had been good for FC Irlande I then in 2010-2011 the team got everything right. Building on the lessons of the previous two seasons the 1sts lost only one game (in September) and then went to the end of the season on a 21-match unbeaten streak, winning 18! This form deservedly won League Division 1 for FC Irlande for the first time in its history, and by the impressive margin of 14 points, with three games to spare!!!

The team had the perfect balance of a solid defence and an excellent strike force. In 26 games the team conceded only 16 goals, of which four were penalties and one was a comical own goal, and kept 14 clean sheets and only went behind in games four times during the entire season.

In attack FC Irlande I were relentless. Only failing to score twice, they notched 85 goals in 25 matches. Sigve

Dyrnes was top scorer with 26 goals, with skipper Ross Grainger bagging a further 22.

So many individual moments from the the 1st team's performances still stand out to those who witnessed them: Kieran De Groote's goal-line clearance in the 1-0 win against Royal Brussels British in the season opener; JVP's flying save to preserve a 2-1 win against Manzah in the following match; Michael Hough's hat-trick against Brussels LTC; dramatic late winners from Adrian Estiévenart and Enda Rice; David Martin's thunderbolt against Portugal; Sigve's header in the crucial late season victory over Tourinnois; Sylvain's Beckham-esque strike against Manzah; James O'Dowd running the length of a muddy pitch to seal a 3-0 win against New Inn; Fred's last-minute penalty to salvage a draw against Jefke; Benoît Le Saint's volley against La Lorraine; Ross's one-two with Charles

to prise an opening against Ettekijs; and, of course, that stupendous free-kick by Stephen O'Neill to beat the Brits and win the league.

Amidst all the plaudits, the most telling and concise summary of the team's brilliance that year came in a 2-1 home against La Lorraine. On a cold, wet and windy day in November, the Irish midfield trio of Yann, Sylvain and Benoît put on a mesmerising display of passing football that had La Lorraine – the champions – chasing shadows.

As the team walked to the dressing room at halftime the opposition was overheard saying: "Ils sont trop forts au milieu." True, but then, that season, FC Irlande too strong all over the pitch. After 22 seasons FC Irlande had reached the pinnacle of football in ABSSA!

THE FIRST DIVISION WINNING FC IRLANDE I TEAM OF 2010-11

John Van Pool
Kieran de Groote
Alec Elliott
Michael Hough
Ross Grainger
Stephen O'Neill
Enda Rice
Sigve Dyrnes
YannLeleux
Sylvain Penlouilh
David Martin

Stephen De Deckker
Will Parker
Adrian Estievenart
Fred Welslau
Iwan Williams
Daniel Verdon
Charles Coucoual
Thomas Ruyfellaere
James O'Dowd
Benoît Le Saint
Alvaro Zabalza

DIVISION 1	J	G	P	N	M	E	P
Irlande FC 1	26	22	1	3	90	16	69
Tourinnois FC 1	26	18	7	1	54	24	55
Lorraine (La)FC 1	26	16	7	3	63	40	51
Brussels British R 1	26	15	5	6	69	35	51
Jefke Country Club 1	26	12	9	5	60	50	41
Brussels LTC 1	26	12	12	2	37	55	38
New Inn FC 1	26	12	13	1	58	49	37
Manzah FC 1	26	10	12	4	42	50	34
Portugal FC 1	29	9	11	6	55	49	33
Saint Georges RCS 2	26	7	11	8	28	42	29
Ettekijs-Champion 1	26	7	16	3	32	60	24
Forestois SC 1	26	5	15	6	31	54	21
Laeken Tennis FC 1	26	4	15	7	41	73	19
Goalois 1	26	3	18	5	16	79	14

HOW WE WON THE LEAGUE

A review of the season from captain Ross Grainger

In 2008/09 we started well, but faded after Christmas. Last season we started badly, but were unbeaten from November. This season we got it right, losing once in September and then winning 18 of the following 21 matches. At long last this group of outstanding individuals focused their collective talent to deliver the ultimate prize.

The league was won with a victory against Royal Brussels British. Not the 4-1 victory over them in the 23rd match of the season that mathematically confirmed us as champions, but rather the 1-0 victory in the very first match of the season in September. A few people have commented that when the final whistle was blown to bring to an end this exhausting and exhilarating match I ripped off my shirt with just a touch of melodrama. I happily admit this. At that moment I knew that the league was to be ours.

What I didn't know and would not have predicted is just how emphatic our campaign would be. By that beautiful April afternoon when the title was sealed we had shrugged off the challenge of Tourinnois, while also streaking ahead of La Lorraine, Jefke and Royal Brussels British to stand alone at the top by a remarkable 14 points.

We were the best not just in attack but also in defense. The latter achievement was partly helped by our relentless attacking, but mainly from having the best goalkeeper and defenders in ABSSA. Of the 16 goals we conceded, four were penalties, one was a direct free kick, four were from set pieces and one was a comical own goal (the scorer of which shall remain nameless). That means we only conceded six from open play. We kept 14 clean sheets, only conceded two or more goals in three matches and only conceded the first goal four times.

In attack we were relentless. Only failing to score twice, we notched 85 goals in 25 matches (our final match was a 5-0 forfeit win). Sigve and I scored 26 and 22 respectively, with his coming in just 19 appearances. A mere 11 of our total came from set pieces (one of which was Stephen ON's stunning free kick against the Brits). Of the remaining 74 there were some moments of individual brilliance, some great team goals and numerous one-touch finishes from our deadly Norwegian, Sigve. In some matches we ran riot, in others we required a late winner, in latter case most memorably from Adrian (against La Lorraine) and Enda (against Portugal).

What was the secret to these numbers? There's no secret. With 20 players of such quality it was not difficult to find a winning formula. Having JVP for an entire season (he only missed two matches) was crucial. Similarly, we got the most out of Sylvain and Alvaro. However, just as our winning run somewhat surprised me, so the team grew in ways I hadn't envisaged. Michael was a crucial new addition in defense

and (in three matches) in attack. The return in November of Stephen DD was a huge bonus. The presence of Benoît for the first half of the season was critical as we lost Charles for most of this period (though in his few appearances he scored a couple of cracking goals). Adrian got better and better as the season went on, while next to him Enda continued to amaze despite being old enough for the veterans.

And speaking of veterans, the veterans of the first team were as good as ever. David contributed nine goals (the third best in the team); Sigve dominated the front line; Fred was outstanding in defense and attack; Kieran found a home at right back; and Alec, in his final season for the club, was consistently excellent at left back. In midfield, Thomas and Iwan were consistent performers when called upon and next year's captain, Yann "C'est qui?" Leleux was like a white Makelélé.

As everyone has rightly pointed out, the club, not just the first team, won this league. It is fitting, therefore, that when it was sealed with a 4-1 at Royal Brussels British's ground we were able to celebrate with our president, the third team and the veterans, including Dave Verdon, who helped found FC Irlande 22 years ago (having left Royal Brussels British to do so). But most special of all was the man of the match performance given that day by Stephen ON. His story shows that FC Irlande is more than a club - it's a family:

Having suffered a very bad knee injury two seasons ago, Steve began this season in fine form, but then was hit with a terrible family bereavement. Following this he only managed a handful of games (his newborn son also required a lot of time) and it looked as if his season would end modestly. Then came that match against the Brits. On as a substitute early in the first half, he first helped us get back to 1-1 and then, with the game in the balance, scored a majestic free kick to give us the lead, before whipping in a corner onto Sigve's head to make it 3-1 at halftime. It could not have been more fitting that a man who had suffered so much frustration should be the one to secure victory for the club he loves so much.



FC Irlande I, ABSSA Division 1 champions, 2010-2011

REVIEW OF THE SEASON 2008/09

Ross Grainger

Whilst the 1st team was dominating Division 1, the 2nd team faced its first ever season in Division 2 having lost many players leaving Brussels in the close season (such being the perennial problem faced by expatriate teams).

Luckily the club was in very rude health at the time and the 2nds were able to assemble a competitive squad (in spite of having to use no less than EIGHT different keepers during the season!). In came the experienced Mark Cryans, the returning Paul Gavin and fledgling FC Irlande legends Richie Gardiner and "Gorgeous" George Niland. The team would also enjoy the total commitment of two guys from the US Army - apparently Molenbeek is not so scary when you've been to Baghdad!

The team started the season brightly, but assembling a brand new team to compete at a brand new level was never going to be easy and early optimism turned to concern as the 2nds went on a terrible run between October and January, picking up only a handful of points. By New Year, the table had become split in two and the 2nds were slowly sliding towards the wrong end of the table.

They had not been playing especially badly and so it was with relief but not surprise that the team started to pick up points with a bit more consistency. As winter turned to spring, the 2nd team were safely back in mid-table and were even starting to play with a bit of a swagger. Owing to how competitive

the division was the team did not secure mathematical safety until late in the season, but the team was never in any serious danger and everyone could be proud of a 7th place finish - a jump of 20 places in a little over two seasons!

Steve Byrne was again outstanding for the 2nd team, providing leadership and scoring some crucial goals but the real star of the season was Stevie Welsch who always left everything out on the pitch and easily won player of the year.

FC Irlande III was captained for a second time by Rafa Martinez Naira. He hoped to build on the 4th place that had been achieved by the 'Turds' during his previous reign in 2006-07. Alas it was not to be, but a safe 10th place finish belied the value of the team as a feeder for players for the higher teams.

In contrast, the 4th team had a good season. Their defence improved considerably (so much so that they had the 8th best defensive record out of 56 teams in the whole division 5), even with the departure of Richie to the seconds. The new midfield engine was fuelled by the relentless tackling, passing and some goal scoring by Karl Guilbeau, who won the team's player of the year award with the class that led him straight to the First team the following season! The team was complemented by the arrival of Manuel da Silva, so the 4ths had the luxury of a striker who could both score goals and could keep possession and feed his playmates. The same season saw also Luca and Emanuele Ceci joining: the club's first twins, who could defend,

pass and curse at each other equally well, as well as the free spirit Jean-Gabriel Klingheim, capable of tear apart a defence even better than he does with girls' hearts. They all contributed to a tremendous season, culminating in the highest points total achieved by FC Irlande IV (30 points).

Back in the 3rd vets Division (aka Division 6F) the Vets gave a good shot at regaining promotion at the first attempt. The team was hampered by the lack of a permanent goalie but Pietro Bienvenuto performed the task heroically for most of the season (in spite of being the shortest player in the team!). In a yoyo season the vets were in the promotion pack to the very end but once again narrowly missed out on promotion.

2010-2011 season also saw the creation of a 'friendly team', playing on Sunday mornings in Melsbroek. Led by Paul Jarvis and Antonio Nobre it was set up to assess if there was demand for a 2nd Vets team. It was clear that the numbers of players for vets football was growing and the idea of a 2nd vets team had already been floated by Vets supremo Paddy Corr the previous season when he had polled players. Then there was caution over whether there would be sufficient numbers to make an expansion workable. So, as a compromise, the 'friendly team' was created. It served its purpose, as it showed the numbers did add up – for the following season a 2nd FC Irlande vets team would play in ABSSA.

Season 23

2011-2012

(FC Irlande I in Division 1, FC Irlande II in Division 2, FC Irlande III in Division 4, FC Irlande IV in Division 5, FC Irlande Vets I in Vets Division 2, FC Irlande Vets II in Vets Division 3)

Defending the league title after such a fantastic performance in the 2010-2011 season, was always going to be a tricky task for the 1st team. The challenge was made more difficult with the team losing four major players over the summer: two former 1st team captains and FCI Irlande legends, Alec Elliott and Ross Grainger, together with French midfield pair Charles Cocoual and Benoît LeSaint. Add to this, the incredible number of injuries and absences - 39 players played for the 1st team that season, a terrible broken leg for S. De Decker and the captain out most of the season with a cruciate injury, meant that retaining the title was not realistic. Nonetheless, FC Irlande I managed to finish a creditable 6th in the table, with the highlight a great 2-1 win away to Royal Brussels British. During the season the team gained some very talented new players, among them C. O Donoghue and E. Ramada whilst the Viking striker Sigve Dyrnes once again finished top scorer (and Player of the Year), ably assisted by fantastic playmaker Sylvain Penouilh.

For the 2nd team new captain Rich Gardiner had a difficult act to follow after the success of Pete O'Broin in taking the Second team from near relegation in the 3rd Division to 3rd Division Champions and then a solid 2nd Division outfit. Overall the season, was solid and largely

efficient, finishing in the top half of the table thanks to an unbeaten run in the final seven games of the season.

The footballing progress of FC Irlande IV started by Antonio Nobre continued this season under the captaincy of Bart van Malcot. A blistering start to the season – winning four of the opening five matches – saw the 4ths reach the giddy heights of 2nd place in the table: a new first for the team! A slump in both form and availability of players in October and November saw the team drop to 6th place but this would be the lowest position the team would hold for the entire season.

A winning streak in December and February, including an impressive away win to Ettekijs, then 4th in the league, and a well-deserved draw away to runaway leaders Bouks, saw FC Irlande IV move up to third place, but an away defeat to Royal Brussels British at the end of March finally crushed any hopes of going up. A fantastic season was capped in style when the Fourths defeated runners-up Iris United 4-0 in the final game of the season : a brilliant game played on the top pitch at Nossegem and watched by many club members. The 4ths had bettered the previous season and finished in fourth place, with a team record 39 points. Manuel Da

Silva was top scorer with 12 goals and Paul Garvey (brought in from the Thirds early on in the season) deservedly won Player of the Year after a massive season as the team's engine in midfield and scoring 7 vital goals, with Emmanuele Ceci and Jeroen Heijlaerts, both reliable defenders as well as tremendous team players, joining Paul on the podium.

In the Vets football, the advent of a 2nd team meant more places to fill. Inevitably, as with all new teams the 2nd vets struggled to get a settled team and suffered the perennial problem of 'feeder' teams in not having a proven goalscorer. It was no surprise that goalie Ray Desmond – the busiest player on the team – was Player of the Year. The points haul – 17 – was modest, but FC Irlande VI enabled players such as Ken Coyne, Farid Sedira, and Aissa Fellak make their debuts for the club, whilst also offering regular football for more 'mature' vets.

Meanwhile for FC Irlande V (aka the 1st Vets) younger players were now trickling down from the first and second teams, notably Chris Jones, Mark Cryans and Sean O'Connor. The 1st vets started the season well but ran out of steam as the season went on, but finished comfortably in the top half of the table.

AND THEN THERE WERE SIX – HOW THE 2ND VETS TEAM CAME TO BE

A tale for the history books from Antonio Nobre

It was the usual damp mid-April evening in Nossegem, where a bunch of lads waited for the rain to calm down hanging around the bar after a training session. Some of the usual Fourth players, aka the regulars, were present, Bart, Antonio, Alan, Joris (Denis had already cycled off into the night vaguely in the direction of Brussels). Inevitably, wise and philosophical questions began to come forth: What will happen next season, who will be Fourth team Captain after such a brilliant season? What does one do with so many players, especially the ones already in their years of wisdom (i.e. past it)?

Suddenly Alan Norton says what was on everyone's mind (or most probably only his own) „Antonio, you'd be just right to start a new vets team". He added "As we have the manpower, the Club will surely support the idea and this way we'll give football time to lads having trouble following Manu around the pitch". I knew he was right. Alan Norton is always right.... After all, who could question a man who lost the kit bag because he was holding his dog, or lost his dog because he was holding...what was it again? (How his wife ever trusted him to bring his children to FC Irlande matches is a mystery).

So, at the AGM the team got the word go. For that first season FC Irlande Vets 2 (or FC Irlande 6, to give the team its official ABSSA name) the home venue was also next to the airport, but in Melsbroek as there wasn't enough room for us in Nossegem. (this is not to suggest that the Vets 2 players were so big.....).

For the inaugural game – ironically for me against Portuguese expat team Campomaiorense - on 02/09/2011, the starting line-up saw Tony Shortall in goals, Kieran Cagney, Antonio Nobre, Paul Jarvis and Ian McConnell in defence, midfield with Erwin Van'tLand, Pierre Desbareau, Mike Young, Denis

O'Sullivan, and Ray Desmond supporting the lone striker, Kevin Bradley. On the bench (yes, we had a sub!) Paul Staunton, who refereed the game in the first half and scored a beauty of a goal in the second, sending a cannonball 25 metres from the goal straight to the right corner. I would like to say, dear reader, that we won the game 1-0. Alas, the final score was 1-9 - the fact that the day was so hot we could have actually been playing in Portugal was one mitigating factor for Irlande, but we didn't care: we had fielded a team and forfeited the match, we had scored a goal and stopped the opponents to go into double figures! Like a baby giraffe that has just been born the 2nd Vets had quickly got to its feet, very unsteadily, but was now ready to run for the rest of the season and beyond!

The season wasn't as easy as I thought, and the challenges were sometimes hard mountains to climb. But the atmosphere in the team was so extraordinary, the energy I witnessed on and off the pitch was so incredible that all the difficulties were soon forgotten. As well as the debut game particularly memorable matches that debut season were the first win for FC Irlande VI – at home to Pangloss, 2-1 with goals by Mike and Farid – a thriller at home to Chenois, which we won 4-3, through a last minute own-goal, and the win at the derby away to ROYAL BRUSSELS BRITISHFC (Irlande scores first through a free kick beautifully taken by Reinardt, the Brits equalize in a counter attack, just to see Aissa scoring the winner in one of his trademark dribbling penetrations through the defence).

When the season was over, FC Irlande saw a proud bunch of players, happy with the 17 points they'd earned and a new team established for the future. And not a single game forfeited through a shortage of players – we had shown that a 2nd Vets team was feasible!



FC Irlande Vets II, 2011-2012

Season 24

2012-2013

(FC Irlande I in Division 1, FC Irlande II in Division 2, FC Irlande III in Division 4, FC Irlande IV in Division 5, FC Irlande Vets I in Vets Division 2, FC Irlande Vets II in Vets Division 3)

During the close season the long reign and successful reign of Denis O'Sullivan as Club President came to an end and he was replaced as President by veteran and club founder-member Dave Verdon. Unfortunately, on the football field 2012-2013 would be a season of big disappointments.

The First team saw the return to the club of Ross Grainger (after a season playing for a provincial team) and he resumed the captaincy. But could he repeat the feat of leading the team to winning the league? The team he took over had lost no less than 11 of the players from our glorious championship-winning campaign, in part through injury and in part to the natural turnover of persons leaving Brussels. In their place a raft of new stars emerged. In goal, Darragh McMahon, Slava and Eduardo Mulas offered a hitherto unheard of abundance of keeping quality. In defence, Karl Guilbeau moved from the fourth team to establish himself as our preeminent right back. In midfield, Cillian O'Donnoghue, Ernesto Ramada, Ronan Lyangh and Stepan Svoboda offered goals, assists and technical expertise.

During the season, some of the football played and goals scored by FC Irlande I illuminated the championship. In terms of both quality and quantity (91 goals), the 1sts surpassed what they had achieved two years earlier. Throughout the season the team turned in some great performances: 2-1 away to Royal Brussels British on a freezing day to supplant them at the top of the league; 4-2 away to Ambience Auderghem, having been 2-0 down with 15 minutes to go; 3-1 at home to Coin du Balai, when we played the last 20 minutes with nine men. And in one memorable sequence they beat Manzah, Jefke, New Inn and Tourinnois by a combined scored of 32-3.

With three games to go the 1sts were joint top in a three horse race. They then met fellow challengers Brussels LTC and lost 1-2, freezing on the day. The defeat was fatal to the team's title chances (and Brussels LTC would go on to be champions) with FC Irlande I eventually finishing in 3rd place – 6 defeats in the season proving to be too many dropped points. That 3rd place was perceived as failure by some of the team was a measure of how far FC Irlande had come. If the 1st team tasted disappointment at the top end of Division 1 then FC Irlande II were to experience greater disappointment at the bottom end of Division 2. Rich Gardiner started his 2nd season as captain in confident mood.

Overall, the team was solid, with some more additions in the form of Euan, Paulie & Gregz. But it was a classic case of a team getting off to a bad start to the season and never recovering. That the team's relegation was only confirmed on the final day of the season, thanks to winning all of their last five matches, said much for their fighting spirit in adversity. One of those wins came Against Brussels LTC on a sunny day in Ixelles when the 2nds pulled off the miracle of miracles by beating the home side 1-0 with only 9 men. Two rushes of blood to the head sent Steve W & Gregz for an early shower and all seemed doomed as FC Irlande II played most of the second half with 9 men. That was until goal machine Steve B popped up with a late winner and the team hung on in the final ten minutes to record a famous win.

The Turds had another difficult season and in particular struggled with player availability. The 3rds fought a constant battle against relegation and ended up needing an administrative error by one of our competitors to stay up.

Vets 1 again began with great spirit, determined to get the Vets into the top Division. The squad was bolstered with Enda Rice and Stevie Byrne joining the Vets from the 1st and 2nd teams and Ben Gannon and Sean O'Connor were brought into the fold. The team started strongly but once again faded, finishing in the top half of the league. The 2nd vets improved on their debut season and finished with a reasonable 24 points.

The season also saw some notable landmarks in FC Irlande vets football. Ian McConnell scored a goal for the 2nd vets – making him, at 65 years of age, the club's oldest scorer (taking the record away from the youthful Dave Verdon). Ian would later retire after 23 seasons for FC Irlande as injury was telling its toll and was honorary captain for the vets for his last game. And, at the end of the season, Paddy Corr – the Alex Ferguson of FC Irlande – stepped down (or was it "hung up his hairdryer"?) after 8 seasons as Manager of the 1st Vets team and, like Sir Alex, took up a new post in the club.



The end of an era

Season 25

2013-2014

(FC Irlande I in Division 1, FC Irlande II in Division 3, FC Irlande III in Division 4, FC Irlande IV in Division 5, FC Irlande Vets I in Vets Division 2, FC Irlande Vets II in Vets Division 3)

For the 25th anniversary season the club, with generous assistance from club sponsors “the Hairy Canary” and the “Funky Monkey”, reverted back to its ‘traditional’ kit of all-green shirts and white shorts: the national colours of the Irish football team. This had been the kit worn during FC Irlande’s inaugural season in ABSSA.

Another development was the introduction by ABSSA of tablets to record match details, replacing the legendary pink sheets. It was perhaps inevitable that matches would be forfeited due to ‘technical difficulties’ with the new tablets, though given FC Irlande’s traditional cultural difficulties with administration, it is perhaps a positive sign that the number of forfeits was only two (and, amazingly, no tablet was lost or broken!!)

On the footballing side the season was an excellent one for the club as a whole, as three FC Irlande teams tasted success.

For the 4ths Manu da Silva took over as captain from Luca Ceci. Manu took his role seriously and instigated a serious training regime for the team. A heavy pre-season training regime, followed by a well balanced weekly programme (both physically challenging and tactical) paid dividends. The team started the season very sharp - winning 9 and

drawing 1 of their opening 11 games. By the winter break FC Irlande IV were 2nd place in the table, but were in a 4-horse race. Interestingly, the 4ths proved to be strongest in away games, winning 11 of their 13 matches. The team consisted of 8 core players who joined the club at least 2 years ago and that team spirit and understanding played a vital role in the team’s success. They were complemented by talented new players such as Antonio Celis (goalkeeper), John Sparks (topscorer), Yannick Hackx, Hadrien Valembois, Hendrik Hemminga, Francesco Del Zompo, Joel Tchagongnom and Cesar Oyarce. The mix of new and old worked well both on and off the pitch.

It was against top-of-the Tervuren (champions) that we confirmed the promotion with a 2-1 victory on their pitch, a game that many of the players will never forget. John Sparks got the winning goal in the last minutes and would end up POY. We ended the epic journey with 55 points – ten points clear of 3rd place, 21 goals conceded (the best in the Division and 3rd best in ABSSA!), a ten-game undefeated run, 12 clean sheets and the first promotion ever for the 4th team!!

Meanwhile, the 1st Vets team – under new captain Mark Cryans – had an excellent season and secured promotion

(albeit by the back door) for the first time to the top division of Veterans football. With the breakthrough of many of the players who originally guided FC Irlande I to the 1st Division now sufficiently ripe to play for the vets and with the addition of a couple of new recruits in Fraser Hughes and Max Kroymann Vets 1 were able to mount a strong challenge for the league. This looked far from certain, however, when the season started with two consecutive defeats. But there would be only two more defeats the entire season.

Victory over league leaders Ambience Auderghem even saw Vets 1 top the table in early February (albeit having played a game more). However, a couple of unnecessary draws saw the team finish the year in second place 6 points behind Auderghem. Star player throughout the season was goal machine Stevie Byrne who scored an incredible 26 goals and was awarded POY.

Officially, only one team from each of the two 2nd tier divisions is promoted to Division 6A – the top Vets division. However, since the winners of 6B - Brussels LTC – already have a team in Division 6A a promotion spot became available. As the best second placed team Vets 1 secured promotion and will now face the big boys in the top division season 2014-2015.

continued

continued

And the third of the winning trio of teams was FC Irlande Ladies, who won the FCI Ladies Cup, beating British United Ladies in 5-2 in the final. A detailed account can be found in Part 5.

For the 1st team the season was disappointing. New Captain Darragh McMahon started the season with a squad badly affected by suspensions and unavailable players. The 3rd game of the season was away to Royal Brussels British. A strong team was fielded and an excellent performance deserved a draw – but the Brits got a late winner. They went on to win the league by a record margin – unbeaten in the process – whilst Irlande I struggled to find any form. In total 5 of the opening 7 games were lost and, briefly, relegation threatened. However, a mid-season spurt which saw seven wins in 8 games banished those fears though an erratic season ended with five straight defeats.

10th place in the league was the lowest finish for the 1st team for five seasons.

For FC Irlande II new captain Nick Simoncini took the helm as the 2nds played in Division 3 following their relegation the previous season. Another tough season ensued though the team managed to finish a few places above the relegation spots.

For the 3rds new captain Paddy Wall took the helm and the team finished in a respectable mid table position. The team had been close to a promotion spot for most of the season but player movements within the club saw the squad begin to thin out all of a sudden half way through the season. This, combined with some crucial injuries saw the team struggle for consistency in the final third of the season. It was back to scraping together 11 players on a Friday and having to play people out

of position. However, the Turds could be proud of being one of only three teams to beat the Divisional winners, Ihvan FC. And they demonstrated that they have potential to build on for next season.

The 2nd Vets team had a transitional season, as it acted in its primary role of providing cover for the 1st vets team. The mobility between the two teams is now such that many of the regulars on the 2nd vets team can be considered to be regulars of the 1st vets team of the previous seasons.

One black moment of the season that affected the club – and in particular the vets teams – was the sudden and tragic death of Warren O'Connor during the season. With heavy hearts the vets played the following weekend and gave their all in memory of him – he would have been proud of their 2-0 victory.



Postscript:

FC IRLANDE VETS 1 Promoted to Division 6A
Well done guys, and good luck next season.

FC IRLANDE TEAMS SEASON 2013-14



FC Irlande I



FC Irlande II



FC Irlande III



FC Irlande IV



FC Irlande Vets I



FC Irlande Vets II



FC Irlande Ladies

Part 6 - FC Irlande Ladies Football

FC Irlande has been active in ladies football since 1982. However, the story of the FC Irlande Ladies team has followed a different path to that of the men's football and so merits a chapter of its own in the club history. In fact, the club has had two distinct spells being actively involved in ladies football in Belgium. The first from 1982 - 1998. Then after a pause of too many years, FC Irlande finally started taking the idea of a Ladies team seriously, and in 2008 the decision was taken to re-launch the team. Over the past six years the team has had two captains, Marilena (Maz) Zammit and Anna Vaher-Conlon.



FC IRLANDE LADIES (FIRST TIME ROUND)

A short history by Susan McEneaney

It was early in 1982 when the 'WAGS' of the future FC Irlande were encouraged by Noel Egan to set up a ladies team. It began as a Sunday morning indoor session in the sports centre at Auderghem but quickly gained popularity and moved to being outdoors. Paul McCourt and Paul Dempsey were the original team coaches. In those early days some of the regular players were Sue Kelly, Sue Sexton, Joan Swan, Susan McEneaney, Maureen McGeogh, Helen McCarthy, Carmel Dunne, Aisling Egan, Patricia Bergin, Ita Murray, Grainne Dempsey, Eileen Ludden, Bonnie Breslin, Fiona Kearns, Anne Hamell - all connected in some way to the men's team.

The coaches were tough and training was rigorous. A number of the ladies were ex-gaelic and camogie players, therefore well used to the football field and all that goes on on it.

By October 1986 the (bachelor) trio of Liam Durack, Paddy Kenneally and John Lalor had taken over the reins of coaching the ladies. Some time after that Terry McCourt (brother of Paul) also became involved with the training. With this kind of coaching the ladies progressed quickly and skilfully and soon earned a name for being a side to watch out for.

The first outdoor ladies match was against a Danish au pairs team. This was played at the British School on St. Patrick's Day 1987. Such was the positive spirit of the Irish Ladies team that not only did some of the Danish girls played half a game for each team, but several of them - such as Annelise Libo, Bente Nielssen, Iben Hjortshøj, Lone Hanssen and Anita Hanssen - subsequently became stalwarts of FC Irlande ladies!

By the summer of 1987 Robert Missen and John Ludden had by now taken over the coaching of the ladies team in a relationship that was part Brian Clough/Peter Taylor and part Morecambe and Wise. Player numbers were very healthy with the recruitment of newer players such as Veronica O'Reilly, Bernie Heavey, Patricia Hickey, Donna Tunstall, Marina Keogh, Sue Phillips, Anna Murphy, Kate Ryan and Carol-Anne O'Keeffe. It was a strong team and was now signed up to the Brabant League, playing matches on Sundays throughout the Province. As with FC Irlande

men's team the Elephant pitch was the home of the ladies team and a great turnout of supporters was to be had on the sideline each Sunday afternoon - whether for the classy football skills or the classy good looks???

May 1987 saw the trip to Luxembourg and Germany - mens and ladies teams. The ladies played at the Luxembourg Irish sports day (that was the weekend of the great chance encounter with the Irish International Squad in the pub and the subsequent 'sessuin' back at their hotel - Paul McCourt and Niall Quinn singing duets!!). The following day the ladies played a German side who fed them an enormous stew just before the game - no need to go into the details of that game!!!

The early 90's saw some new speed arrive in the club in the form of Therese Brown and Cindy McCarthy - these were the fastest legs Brabant had ever seen- and they had the football skills to match. 1992 saw the ladies team finally lay claim to the Brabant Cup and if memory serves correctly, it was also the first year the ladies won the league.

The team went from strength to strength with a solid core of about 8 players who remained throughout the team's life but - as many of the team were au-pairs and just passing through Brussels - the rest of the squad changed annually. In one season alone there were 12 Nationalities on the squad - Australian, Canadian, S.Africa, Norway, USA, plus all the EU countries and more. The ladies team were wonderful and willing contributors to the social life of FC Irlande and helped put together many a great Player of the Year night.



FC Irlande Ladies, circa 1990

Eventually, some of the team players felt a need to move on to other clubs. Some moved to play with Everberg Ladies, some went to play more serious footie with a Provincial side in Tubize, and others eventually moved to White Star at Stade Fallon. Thus, sadly, by 1998 FC Irlande Ladies (1) was disbanded and so the club, for the first time and only time in its history, actually lost a team.

The Return of FC Irlande Ladies team

After Marilena's years in charge, which had laid a foundation for advancement, the leader's baton was passed to Anna Vaher-Conlon, a player with top-level experience as a goalkeeper in Estonia, but who preferred to play outfield. Anna's goal was to bring the team to the next level, by converting commitment and team-spirit into success on the field. It is fair to say that, over the next three years, she and the Ladies team far exceeded all expectations.

Anna inherited a squad which already included some quality players, including a few like Aline who were probably good enough to play for some of the men's teams, and a lot of enthusiastic but less experienced players – many had only started playing football when they joined FC Irlande. Her challenge was to build this group into a winning team, but realistically the team still needed a couple more players to get to the next level. In many games, FC Irlande Ladies played as well as the opposition all over the field; they fought harder, they were fitter, but just did not get the result – either conceding a soft goal, or, more often, failed to score despite creating many chances. In short, the Ladies team faced the same teething pains that all the club's men's teams, bar the 1sts, had faced in their early days.

The 2011/12 season brought not just the addition of Anna's tactical expertise to leading and coaching the team, but also some great new recruits who would finally start to turn performances into points. First of all, FC Irlande got Ida, an excellent goalkeeper, who gave us stability in a position where previously different players had stood in every week. With Ida Mattiasson in goal, and a solid defence in front of her, the goal tally "against" started to decline rapidly. No longer would FC Irlande concede 100 goals in a season. It is no surprise that Ida was voted player of the year for 2011/12. But the other amazing recruit that season was Virginie Verdin – amazingly fast and committed, and with a goalscoring touch that only Stevie Byrne could understand. She formed a striking partnership with a resurgent Evelyne Queeckers and suddenly the team was scoring more goals than they'd ever dreamed of! An improved defence and a potent attack meant progress. In 2011/12 the team finished a comfortable mid-table position and often frightened even the strongest teams. Suddenly FC Irlande ladies were a force to be reckoned with.

If 2011/12 was the team's coming of age, then 2012/13 was just outstanding. Aline Franck, who had always been amazing, was playing even better than before, the regulars who'd been there from the start from the start were getting better all the time, Ida was stopping everything that came near the goal, and suddenly FC Irlande Ladies were a genuinely competitive team. In the league there were two teams who were just head-and-shoulders above all the others, but Irlande were

in the race for third place – and after many wonderful days including an amazing home victory against great friends and rivals British United (the first time Irlande Ladies had beaten them), FC Irlande achieved a record 3rd place finish. From nowhere a few years earlier, FC Irlande we were now one of the best Ladies teams in the entire KBLVB league.

Player of the Year in 2012-13 was Aline Franck, an overdue recognition of her ability from the team's early days. 2013/14 proved to be another special season. Success on the field meant that the club was attracting new, quality players (though, inevitably, the curse of expat teams meant that a couple of players were also lost). FC Irlande Ladies again were competitive in the league, eventually finishing fifth, but more than compensated for this by an amazing run in the cup, in which FC Irlande reached the Cup Final. In an amazing day in Diest (about 50km east of Brussels), in front of a cheering crowd including players from all the men's teams, FC Irlande Ladies beat British United Ladies 5-2 in a wonderful game to claim their first ever trophy in their second incarnation.

FC Irlande ladies are back – and it is to be hoped that this taste of success is only the start! But the final word goes to ex-captain Maz: "When I look at how the Ladies' team has developed over the years, and where it is today, it was without a shadow of a doubt all worth it. It always was, and still is, a pleasure to see how the girls bond together on and off the pitch, to see new players joining the family, to see how much fun everyone has together, how hard everyone works as a team, and how eager the girls always are for the next challenge. I look forward to the next 25 years of this wonderful club, with the Ladies' team remaining an integral cog in its machinery"!!!!

No history of the FC Irlande Ladies would be complete without mention of a couple of men who were instrumental in making the team what it is. The first is Paddy Corr, who from the beginning has been a coach, trainer, delegate' and ever-present supporter of the team, always with a positive word to offer (albeit sometimes in an accent that none of the players can understand). Even if he hasn't quite mastered the art of pronouncing names like Clelia and Kajsa, he's been unfailing in his commitment to the team over the years, through good times and bad. The second is Conchur de Barra who regularly led designed and the Ladies training and supported in many other ways during the first few years ... he too was a constant source of positive energy and motivation for the Ladies – there were probably times when the team needed some blind optimism, and who better to provide that than a man who has since then successfully opened up the first ever Irish pub in Haiti!

THOSE DIFFICULT FIRST SEASONS

FC Irlande Ladies 2008-2011 by Marilena Zammit

We had our first ever training session in September 2008, on the ADEPS clay pitch (where many years earlier, the men's team had trained). We were 8 girls, 2 coaches (Paddy Corr and Conchur de Barra), a few footballs, not a lot of skill, but a lot of enthusiasm. We trained once, then twice, a week. We borrowed the Belgium GAA Ladies' jerseys (since we did not yet have our own) to wear at any friendlies or tournaments we could get our hands/feet on. We soon moved to the KVV pitches in Woluwe to train with the lads. We trained indoors at BSB in winter, and in Parc Cinquantaire in summer, by which time we had grown to about 35 on/off members.

As we had demonstrated both the organisational capability to run a team, plus sufficient enthusiasm (and a little footballing ability, too!) we took the plunge and an FC Irlande ladies team joined the KBLVB league for season 2009/10. Dutch-speaker Katleen Driessens was vital in the administrative process of registration with the league (and has continued to perform the vital task of team secretary for five years). Melsbroek would be our home pitch as there was no space at Nossegem.

I cannot explain the excitement when our very own brand new shiny FC Irlande Ladies' jerseys were delivered. We were enthusiastic, we were motivated, we were ready to play

some competitive matches. Saying that it was a tough league was the understatement of the year. We ended the league 14th out of 15 teams, having played 28 games, won 4, lost 23, and drawn 1. We finished with 13 points; 180 goals against and 27 goals for. We drove on, ever more determined. Kajsa Svensson was the new team's first player of the year.

For season 2010/2011 we moved to Nossegem to be with the lads. But things did not get any easier for the Ladies' team. Even though we had a large pool of potential players, there were weekends when we were struggling to find enough for a full squad. On some occasions we fielded teams made up of as few as 9 players. But even through the big losses, the injuries, and the frustrations, we never gave up our determination, spirit, and love of the game. We ended the season bottom of the league having played 22 games, won 1, lost 19, and drawn 2; 118 goals against and 16 goals for. The Player of the Year was Geanina Anghel.

Those first couple of seasons in a highly competitive league were by no means an easy battle – many, many tears, lots of sweat, and even blood were shed, and many sincerely thought the Ladies' team would not make it another season. But the team stood strong.



FC Irlande Ladies 2010/11

FC IRLANDE LADIES WIN THE CUP!

By our match correspondent, Denis O'Sullivan

Diest football ground echoed to the sound of FC Irlande players and fans singing "Stand up for the Girls in Green" (to the tune of the infamous "Stand up if you're Michael Mann") as FC Irlande Ladies achieved a historic cup victory with a 5-2 victory over rivals British United in a match that showcased both the great sportsmanship and the quality football that both teams can play.

It was far from easy. United took the lead after only 14 seconds, and we had our backs to the wall. But we had quality players and they came through on the day. Pauline got an equaliser and soon afterwards the same Pauline put us ahead 2-1. If the stadium erupted with that goal, it literally erupted when Clelia put us 3-1 ahead and it began to look like it would be our day. 5 minutes before the half Flo got a 4th and we went in 4-1 ahead. But we knew it was far from over, and BU came out fighting in the second half - they got a goal back and only a great save by Mariana, touching the ball onto the bar, prevented them from making it a 1-goal difference. But instead, we brought the ball forward and Virginie, as usual unplayable for the opposition, ran in from the left and put in a dangerous low cross which an unfortunate BU defender turned into her own net. Instead of 4-3 it was 5-2, and from then on we were reasonably comfortable. Our defence was rock-solid all day, anchored by the amazing Niamh, while we put together some great passing moves going forward and always looked dangerous ... we could have had more, but who cares.

When the final whistle went, the ground erupted again, the team and captain Anna celebrated like never before and the many fans, with a good representation from all the men's teams, including all the senior team captains, no doubt looking to poach some of the players, celebrated almost more than the players. It was truly a great day for the club. It was made even better by the fact that the other team was British United, who also brought a busload (literally) of fans and added to the positive atmosphere, with both team hugging and applauding each other as they went up to receive their medals. As the presenter said in his speech, United and ourselves are close in the league, either team could have won on the day, we're thrilled it was us, we deserved it on the day, Anna had the team prepared perfectly and even Paddy's half-time team-talk couldn't stop us.

FC Irlande Ladies won thanks to a fantastic team performance. The defence was rock solid, the forwards were hungry and the midfield was composed and skilful. Everyone had a different idea of who should get Woman of the Match (Paddy mentioned Claudia - who wasn't even playing - then Kelya - who doesn't exist) and many different moments were also highlighted as possible turning points, involving different players. Anna summed it up best when she said that "this game proved that we are not a one-woman team". And it was great to see our first FC Irlande Ladies captain, Maz, at the game too - she and Anna are the biggest reasons why we have this amazing team today.



EPILOGUE

THE CLUB AT 25 – WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS

A personal view from current Club President Dave Verdon

As this history shows the dream of an expatriate Irish football team started a long time ago, and the hard work and commitment of many people helped firstly to achieve the founding of FC Irlande, and its subsequent stabilisation and growth as a club. As one of the founder members I never imagined that FC Irlande would be a club of six teams in ABSSA, plus a ladies team – indeed, that we would become as big as the Royal Brussels British FC and British United who have been around a lot longer than us.

But with this size comes responsibility. The club has become an asbl and it is vitally important that the club continues to develop off the field to match its growth in footballing activities. So the first task is to ensure that FC Irlande is a sustainable, self-financing club with adequate playing and training facilities.

I am pleased to say that the Club is achieving this goal, but it can always do better! The future of FC Irlande will, in my view, be directly linked to having a membership that is active

in running the club. People need to volunteer to be captains, trainers, committee members and help in fundraising. Similarly, members should promptly pay their subscriptions in order to ensure that the Club can meet its obligations. The future for FC Irlande lies with the club being run more professionally – but that can only be achieved through greater input from the members.

A question that is often asked is: will FC Irlande ever own its own pitch? In the short term the answer is “no” as this would be a huge project and the club today does not have the financial or administrative resources to even contemplate this step. But who is to say what is possible in the next 25 years if the club develops off the field. However, I am confident that we have laid the seeds of a club that will continue to grow and that in 25 years time there will be opportunities for my grandchildren to play football for FC Irlande. I just hope I will be at the Golden Jubilee dinner!!

Dave Verdon, President

IN MEMORIAM

In 25 years over 250 players have played for FC Irlande in ABSSA. Here we remember three who sadly are no longer with us.

Brian Kelly was a stalwart of FC Irlande for the first 7 seasons of the clubs history, when he was a fixture as centre-half, originally for the Second team and subsequently for the Vets (playing a total of 86 games). In fact like many FC Irlande players Brian had resurrected his football career when coming to Brussels, having retired from the game in Dublin after having a kidney removed – a fact that nobody would have guessed from the fearless way he played.



With his big, strong physique Brian was the archetypal uncompromising centre-half – strong in the air and hard in the tackle – but was always fair and sporting, never maliciously fouling an opponent or giving dissent to a referee. Such was his ability and contribution on the pitch that Brian won Player of the Year twice – for the Second Team in 91/92 and for the vets in 94/95. His particular trademark on the pitch was diving headers – not bad for a big man!

Off the field Brian was charming, never having a bad word for anybody and his warm personality and sociable nature meant that he was never lonely for company during a post-match or post-training analysis in the bar. At one stage FC Irlande II prided itself on never leaving an away venue before the home team (and often cleaning bars out of their stock of Hoegaarden), and Brian could be relied upon to be amongst the stalwarts doing ambassadorial work for the image of FC Irlande!

Brian Kelly sadly died on 17 November 2006, succumbing to pancreatic cancer.

If anybody epitomised the spirit of FC Irlande, and enjoyed to the full playing Saturday football it was Brian. May his infectious smile shine down upon us whenever FC Irlande plays...

In 2008 the club again mourned the passing of a former player with the sudden death by heart attack of Baljeet Birring, a very popular player with the club in the 1990s. His passing at such a young age came as a great shock to his many friends in the club who have such fond memories of playing and celebrating with him.



This year we suffered the loss of Warren O'Connor who tragically died in January 2014, aged just 44. Warren had been with FC Irlande since 1996 and during that time had played for every men's team, including a long period with the first team. He was also a former club-trainer and his brothers, sister and brother-in-law were all FC Irlande players.

Warren had suffered the sad loss of his 6-year old daughter, Aileen, to cancer in 2006.

Warren was one of our most popular players, rarely seen without a smile or a big grin on his face. Even when he was injured, he was frequently to be seen at pitch-side cheering on his teammates. Upon hearing the news of his death there was a huge outpouring of grief from Club Members both past and present and many travelled back to Brussels to be present at the funeral. Warren had made many friends with other football clubs in ABSSA and we received many messages of condolence. Warren will never be forgotten and will forever remain in our hearts.

But FC Irlande is more than its on-field members. The club also remembers Lyn Williams – the mother of Geraint Williams (one of the club's star players of the 1990s, and wife of Harvey – who was one of the club's most loyal supporters and also succumbed to cancer.

Annexes

Annex 1 - FC Irlande Team Captains 1989 - 2014

SEASON	1 st Team	2 nd Team	3 rd Team (formed 1993)	4 th Team (formed 2001)	1 st Vets (formed 1994)	2nd Vets (formed 2011)
1989/90	Dave Verdon	Pat Naghten	-	-	-	-
1990/91	Pat O'Reilly	Tom McGrath	-	-	-	-
1991/92	Liam Durack	Robert Missen	-	-	-	-
1992/93	Pat O'Reilly	Austin Rowan	-	-	-	-
1993/94	Dave Verdon	Austin Rowan	Liam O'Sullivan	-	-	-
1994/95	Pat O'Reilly	Bill Sexton	Roddy Feely	-	-	-
1995/96	Niall Thompson	Bill Sexton	Alex Johnston	-	Joe Swan	-
1996/97	Niall Thompson	John Ludden	Peter Walsh*	-	Sean Brett	-
1997/98	Walter Wetzelaer	John Ludden	Simon Mordue	-	Sean Brett	-
1998/99	Walter Wetzelaer	Jonathan Wogan	Leo Toole	-	Paul Jarvis	-
1999/2000	Niall Thompson	Leo Toole	Adrian McDonagh	-	Paul Jarvis	-
2000/01	Niall Thompson	Paul Staunton	Euros Jones	-	Paul Jarvis	-
2001/02	Roger Cogan	Paul Staunton	Laurent Michot	Alan Norton	Paul Jarvis	-
2002/03	Roger Cogan	Jim Kenny	Gregor McDonald	Alan Norton	Terry Waite	-
2003/04	Mark Cryans	Paul Staunton	Alex Kasterine	#	Terry Waite	-
2004/05	Mark Cryans	Paul Staunton	David Glynn	Andreas Hasle	Niall Thompson	-
2005/06	Mark Cryans	John Bryson	Carlos Gomez	Alan Rowan	Paddy Corr§	-
2006/07	D.Martin/B.Gannon	John Bryson	Rafa Martinez	Jeff Bridoux	Paddy Corr§	-
2007/08	Alec Elliott	Gregor McDonald	Robert Jenks	Damien Hegarty	Paddy Corr§	-
2008/09	Alec Elliott	Chris White	Georgio Grandi**	Neil MacLean	Paddy Corr§	-
2009/10	Alec Elliott	Peter O'Broin	Quentin Lamirault	Antonio Nobre	Paddy Corr§	-
2010/11	Ross Grainger	Peter O'Broin	Rafa Martinez	Antonio Nobre	Paddy Corr§	-
2011/12	Yann LeLeux	Rich Gardiner	Dani Marchal	Bart van Malcot	Paddy Corr§	Antonio Nobre
2012/13	Ross Grainger	Rich Gardiner	Jelmer Joosten	Luca Ceci	Paddy Corr§	Antonio Nobre
2013/14	Darragh McMahon	Nick Simoncini	Patrick Wall	Manu Da Silva	Mark Cryans	Reinardt Bijl

Niall Thompson has been (playing) captain five times, and Mark Cryans, Antonio Nobre, Paul Staunton, and Paul Jarvis each four times. What dedication (and insanity) they have shown!

FOOTNOTES

* Peter Walsh left Brussels before the 1996/7 season commenced and was replaced as 3rd team captain by Michael Mann.

In 2003/4 the 4th team had four players who each took turn at being captain: Brian Forbes, Henry Dobbin, Denis O'Sullivan and Ciaran Cagney.

§ In 2005/6 the Vets switched from having a captain to having a non-playing team manager.

** Georgio Grandi left Brussels mid-season and was replaced as 3rd team captain by Jeff Bridoux.

Annex 2 - FC Irlande Presidents 1989 - present

Denis Cagney
Susan McEaney
Liam Durack
Trevor Smith
Roger Cogan
Paul Staunton
Denis O'Sullivan
Dave Verdon

Annex 3 - FC Irlande Home Venues

FC Irlande has played at a total of five permanent home venues during its 25 year history, each with its own distinctive characteristics.

1. BRITISH SCHOOL, TERVUREN 1989-1992

The Club's first home venue was the British School of Brussels in Tervuren – somewhat ironic for an Irish team! The club rented the “elephant pitch” – so-called because it was located a short walk behind the elephant statue on the Leuvensesteenweg. The pitch was of excellent quality, with plenty of grass season, the changing rooms in the school were good and the bar was excellent – with its patron particularly friendly.

Unfortunately, the absence of changing facilities next to the pitch, necessitating a 200m walk from the school (and crossing the busy Leuvensesteenweg) made the venue unpopular with ABSSA – for one season the club even chartered a bus to shuttle opposition teams between the pitch and the changing room – and this, together with realisation that the club would soon need two pitches meant that Irlande's stay at this venue would be short, but pleasant.

Memorable characteristics of the venue: a) In the days before mobile phones considerable energy was used by people running backwards and forwards between pitch and changing rooms whenever items were forgotten. b) As the pitch nestled between houses on three sides it was not unusual to lose balls into gardens. c) the atmosphere in the bar after games!



2. BOSSTRAAT, KRAAINEM (1992-1996)

The next home for FC Irlande was Bosstraat, Kraainem – also the home of New Inn FC, whom Irlande has played against many times in its 25 year history.

Excellent located within walking distance of the metro, there were two pitches laid out ‘nose-to-tail’ with the dressing room and bar complex inbetween the two pitches. The ‘top’ pitch was very good though the 2nd pitch had a significant slope. The club house was virtually brand new – so there was the novelty of having changing rooms with showers that had not yet calcified up! – and the 2nd floor bar allowed an ‘executive box’ view of both matches. Luxury indeed. Unlike at the British School, FC Irlande were also able to do training at the floodlit home venue.

Irlande was one of many clubs heavily using the complex but, despite repeated efforts to forge a close relationship, the club was never anything more than a tenant that was tolerated by the owners and thus as the club sought to expand to five teams there was no willingness to accommodate Irlande in any way.

Memorable characteristics of the venue: a) nice, modern, odourless dressing rooms! b) Given that the complex lies in the middle of fields – about the only part of Kraainem that has not been given over to urban sprawl! – the pitches were also rather exposed and chilly on windy days! c) Playing uphill on the 2nd pitch, particularly when the wind was blowing!



3. EVERESTRAAT, ST STEVENS WOLUWE (1996 - 2009)

The club was fortunate to find in nearby St Stevens Woluwe a pair of pitches that welcomed us happily. Like the previous venue the Everestraat complex had two adjacent pitches of different quality. The dressing rooms and bar were behind one of the goals – so restricting the viewing to only the 2nd pitch, meaning that on dry days spectators would congregate around the half-way line allowing them a view of both matches. (Admittedly, you needed eyes in the back of your head!). With the pitches being adjacent – albeit with a height difference – it was a regular event for a ball from one pitch to end up on the other one!

The dressing rooms and bar were to average ABSSA standard i.e. not as luxurious as at the previous home, but perfectly satisfactory. And what the bar lacked in luxury it made up for in atmosphere: at 4pm it would be completely full.

Sadly, at the end of the 2008-2009 season FC Irlande had to leave in order to facilitate the needs of the club’s other main tenants to expand their Saturday activities.



4. RADAR VLIEGHAVEN, NOSSEGEM (2009 to present)

In 2009 the club relocated to its current home venue in Nossegem.

Memorable characteristics of the venue: a) It is the windiest location in Brussels – that is precisely the reason why the airport was originally built here b) really handy for visiting IKEA before or after a game c) wonderful opportunities for defenders to lose balls in the adjacent maize fields.



5. CHAUSSEE DE HAECHT, MELSBROEK (season 2011/12)

For their inaugural season FC Irlande 6 – also known as FC Irlande Vets2 – had to find a venue other than Nossegem, as there was no spare capacity for an additional team. The pitch they thus chose was the site in Melsbroek where the ‘friendly team’ – the precursor to FC Irlande 6 – had played the previous season.

The vets2 team played only one season there, being able to return to the “mother pitch” and join all the other teams on Saturday home fixture days.

The Melsbroek venue was also home for FC Irlande ladies football.

Memorable characteristics of the venue: A good venue for plane spotters!



Annex 4 - What has changed in 25 years

Some irreverent personal observations from Robert Missen

A quarter of a century is a long time. Over such a period things change – and the ‘Saturday experience’ with FC Irlande is one of them. Here are a few differences over the decades.....

The ABSSA HQ: As everybody who needed an ABSSA Card, or was up in front of the disciplinary committee will remember well ABSSA HQ in 1989 was located in pokey rooms above the pub ‘le Mazarin’ in Ixelles Today it has plush premises close to the Cinquintaire.

Administration: Who would have dreamed in 1989 that the legendary ‘pink sheet’ (and cause of so much anguish for FC Irlande captains over the ages) would be replaced by ‘tablets’? Indeed, in 1989 the only tablets that any of us had heard of were those for curing hangovers..... And at home games the ritual of getting access to the phone in the bar in order to ring the results in, followed by the need to find a ‘volunteer’ to deliver the pink sheet by hand to ABSSA HQ before 18:30 – or risk forfeiting the game.

Kits: The Club has gone from ‘figure hugging’ nylon O’Neills kits to ‘breathing’ state-of-the art Nike shirts. You can say that nothing has changed since they are still synthetic – but that is like comparing a Model T Ford with a car of today. Also, back in 1989 the club provided the full kit – i.e. shorts and socks – in the kitbag. Today, to allow for the varying contours of FC Irlande players each one has their own personalised set of socks and shorts. (The absence of communal washing of dirty socks both makes kit washing less unpopular and reduces the risk of a foot-and-mouth outbreak amongst a team).

Football boots: It is a wonder of the modern age of mass production that football boots today are cheaper than when I bought my first pair to play for FC Irlande 25 years ago. And I mean cheaper in real terms, not even factoring inflation. Such is the wonder of a global economy where everything is made (for pitiful wages) in Asia. Equally, back in 1989 you could have football boots in any colour you like as long as it was black. Today, you struggle to find black boots in the shops.....

Plastic pitches – 25 years ago a plastic pitch meant both a lottery of a game – as the ball bounced as if made of solid rubber – and three days of limping afterwards, either with sore joints (from the hard surface) or friction burns. Today’s plastic pitches are almost nicer than grass, apart from those annoying bits of black rubber that get (literally) everywhere.....

Travelling to away games: with mobile phones to communicate and gps systems to navigate, today’s players do not understand what an adventure it sometimes was travelling to away games. It became club practice for teams to meet at a convenient point (usually the metro stations of Kraainem, Hermann Debroux or Schuman) from where a convoy of five to six cars would then go to the away venue with the most competent map reader being in the lead vehicle. If you were driving the lead car the skill was in trying to keep the last car in vision in your mirror (without you crashing). If you were at the back of the convoy your goal was to ensure you got through the traffic lights at the same time as the first car. Remember, if you got split up you had no mobile phone to call for help. It can be lonely when you are lost in rural Brabant....

Backpasses: in 1989 it was still permitted for goalies to pick up backpasses and throw ins. The current backpass rule only came into force in 1991. Ditto shinpads – which became compulsory to wear (because of AIDS and the risk of blood injuries), snoods – which became illegal to wear (for safety reasons), and bicycle shorts (which became fashionable to wear, but subsequently had to be the same colour as the kit). You know that you are old when you have actually played football to different rules than the present ones....

Smoking: in the good/bad old days the clubhouses after games would be a fug of cigarette smoke. Today, the few smokers have to sneak outside in furtive huddles, as if members of some underground society.

But some things still have not changed: We still find novel ways of forfeiting games 0-5, the quality of the changing rooms and showers still remains variable and FC Irlande continue to play in green, Most important of all it continues to be a fun club!

THE AMAZING 25TH ANNIVERSARY WEEKEND!

It started on Friday when over 100 current and former FC Irlande players and friends met at the Funky Monkey for snacks and drinks. Wonderful memories of times past with many of the founder-members, many veterans of the infamous “turds tours” and great conversations between them and some of the newer players from the championship winning team, many of whom also came back for the weekend. Former players who’d left more than a decade ago were surprised to find that some of the new players still knew about their exploits (thanks in part to Rob Missen’s club history), and ex-players like John Ludden were surrounded by people wondering could he possibly live up to his legendary reputation.

The plan was to have a few quiet drinks; the predictable outcome was that at 3.30 am, when we were encouraged to move to the downstairs part of the bar, there was still a decent crowd in the Funky Monkey. That crowd included the legendary James O’Dowd, over from Dublin, but unfortunately did not still include the equally legendary Pete O’Broin who was supposed to be hosting him that night, resulting in O’Dowd having to crash on Ollie’s sofa.

When we were planning this weekend, it seemed like a really great idea to have a tournament on the Saturday ... but most

of the people who’d been in the Funky Monkey the previous evening and had slept for only 3 or 4 hours were second-guessing that wisdom when we showed up with various degrees of “hungoverness” (or in some cases, still a little drunk) around 10.00 in 30C sunshine at Auderghem. Such was the interest from the players that we had a 9-team tournament with 10 players per team, all teams made up exclusively of FC Irlande current and former players of all levels, mixed together – even as many of the ex-players decided that discretion was the better part of valour and they would just watch and drink beer. The games showcased everything from exquisite skills from former players like Fran and Ronan all the way down to the awkwardness of players who were badly hungover and hadn’t played for a decade - and in some cases were never all that skilful to begin with ... the latter tended to get more reaction from the crowd. In the end Bogdan’s team, featuring former fourth-team legend Brian Mahon in defence, won the first place trophy. A great day was had by all, despite the heat and the hangovers, and well done to organiser Paddy Wall, and also to Paddy Corr who helped out with the logistics on the day.

The Ladies had a different tournament format, where a team of FC Irlande Ladies played against four other teams, although some of these teams included FC Irlande players like Sofie and



THE AMAZING 25TH ANNIVERSARY WEEKEND! continued

Aline. It was a very high-quality tournament, and in the end it came down to one match. FC Irlande Ladies had won our first three matches in the round-robin format, and so had Sofie's team. We played each other in the last round, so this was effectively the final. The game finished 2-2 but in the end we lost on penalties.

After the presentations, it was about 17.00, and we were all wrecked and wanted nothing more than to crash for a few hours. Which was a pity, since in fact we had less than two hours to get home, shower and changed; then down to The Hotel on Boulevard de Waterloo (the same place Barack Obama stays) for the Gala Anniversary Dinner.

Over 200 people attended a sumptuous event which started with "Celtic Canto" performing capello versions of traditional Irish songs and ending with "you will never walk alone". The room décor was fantastic, lots of green and white balloons on every table, and giant screens showing a loop of hundreds of photos from FC Irlande's 25 years. The assembled alumni, current players, friends, girlfriends and others sat down to a delicious meal that was gently interrupted from time to time by MC for the night Paul Skehan. Paul, as only he can, managed

to stay (sometimes at least) just on the right side of good taste while keeping the audience in stitches.

The Irish Ambassador, Eamonn Mac Aodha and his wife were guests, and the Ambassador made a lovely speech about the club and it's part in the Irish community in Brussels, particularly emphasizing the way that Irish expat groups do the country proud through our voluntary spirit – perfectly capturing FC Irlande's volunteering efforts in co-hosting the annual St. Patrick's Day event or raising funds for the Brussels charity, Serve the City, and for Haitian Earthquake relief.

We were also honoured to have the Secretary General of ABSSA, Mr. Willy Luppens, and his wife as guests. Mr. Luppens and ABSSA have been fantastic supporters of FC Irlande over the years, sometimes displaying extraordinary patience as the Irish try to adjust to the Belgian philosophy of actually having rules and following them. Willy received several long rounds of applause both when he was introduced and after his very thoughtful and witty speech.

The final speech was by President Dave, and he perfectly captured the mood of the evening, welcoming all those who'd

FOOTBALL

AUDERGHEM

L'intarissable FC Irlande fête ses 25 ans

Le club d'expatriés se place parmi les grands de l'Abssa avec 150 membres

► En juin 1989, les premières pages de l'histoire du club gaélique, le FC Irlande, furent écrites à quelques pas de la rue de la Loi. Vingt-cinq ans plus tard, l'ASBL s'est enrichie de nombreux footballeurs et footballeuses mais aussi de souvenirs aussi glorieux qu'inoubliables. "Notre ascension ininterrompue de la 6^e division de l'Abssa à la D2 entre 1989 et 1994 reste ancrée dans ma mémoire", confie Dave Verdon, le président du club et capitaine de la première équipe de 1989. "Je me souviens également du titre de l'équipe première en 2011 et, récemment, de la Coupe remportée par nos Ladies (en photos)."

Le FC Irlande peut se targuer d'être une des entités les plus animées de l'Abssa avec six équipes masculines et une équipe féminine, soit plus de 150 âmes. Le

club est un vivier d'expatriés – une trentaine de nationalités est représentée – et compte approximativement 30 % d'Irlandais. "Les boys and girls in green peuvent être décrits comme des personnes qui apprécient l'esprit de compétition mais également le pendant social du sport. Ils parviennent rapidement à mettre les nouvelles recrues à leur aise au

sein du groupe", indique le président.

CE WEEK-END, le club va mettre les petits plats dans les grands pour célébrer ce 25^e anniversaire. La journée de samedi sera dédiée aux tournois masculin et féminin organisés sur les terrains d'Auderghem, leur centre d'entraînements. "En soirée, un

dîner de gala est prévu dans un grand hôtel bruxellois en présence de l'ambassadeur d'Irlande. Une septantaine de membres seront présents, dont certains feront le déplacement de l'étranger."

Les célébrations promettent d'être mémorables connaissant la fureur légendaire des Verts...

Sofie Leclerc



► Dave Verdon, capitaine lors de la 1^{re} saison, se souvient notamment du titre en 2011 et de la récente victoire en Coupe de ses Ladies. © D.R.

THE AMAZING 25TH ANNIVERSARY WEEKEND!

continued

returned, reiterating some of the values that make FC Irlanda great – a phrase we heard time and time again from all the visitors was that FC Irlanda is “more like a family than a football team” – highlighting some great moments over the years, including the 2010/11 team that won the ABSSA Division 1 title – many of whom had travelled from all over the world to be here for the event (see photo), and the Ladies team who won the KBLVB Cup this year. He also paid tribute to the players and fans we’ve lost over the years, especially Warren whose tragic passing this year is still hard for many of us to accept – again here, the support of the FC Irlanda family for Warren’s family has shown what the club is all about.

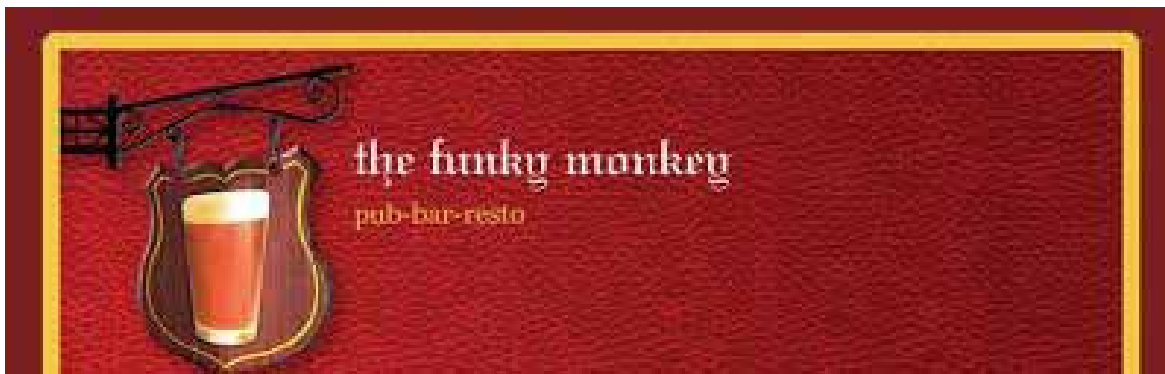
After Dave’s speech it was time for the Player of the Year and other awards. Ambassador Mac Aodh presented the POY award to each recipient from each team to sustained applause. Two other important awards were made. The clubman/woman of the year award went to Paddy Wall, and a special one-off 25th Anniversary Award to the legendary Paddy Corr. This latter award was thoroughly deserved. There isn’t space enough here to list the things he has done and still does for the club, day-in, day-out – coaching and captaining the Ladies and the Vets, organizing delegates every week, collecting trophies,

making coddle. He wears his passion for the club on his sleeve, and embodies so much that is great about FC Irlanda. The announcement was greeted with a huge standing ovation.

You’d think that would be enough for any one evening, but no! In FC Irlanda we have some amazing musical talent too. Matt is the lead-singer and double-bass player in a Rockabilly band – the St. Gillbillies - who are probably the best American-style band in Belgium, and who got the crowd rocking like crazy with some fast beating tunes. And then came the legendary Take This, with our own ex-president Trevor on lead-guitar – they played until 3.00, a good half-hour after the “absolute latest when you have to stop”, but it was impossible to stop as everyone was on the floor dancing and singing and jumping around with more energy than anyone had had during the tournament.

Finally the music was over, sensible people headed home in dlibs and drabs, others headed to Havana and eventually a further diminished group of 6 even got to Celtica at 6.00 or so. (again, see facebook for photos!). We had originally planned to organise golf for Sunday – thankfully common sense prevailed. It truly was a memorable night – a night FC Irlanda honoured itself and its members.





The Funky Monkey

Rue Archimède 6, Brussels, 1000

Open every day from noon till 3 AM



The Hairy Canary

Rue Archimède 12, Brussels 1000

Open every day from noon till 3 AM