

# HOW THE MIGHTY GREEN GIANTS HAVE FALLEN

**JOEY MILLAR** looks at the astonishing decline of Ireland's international team since the World Cup victory over Italy in 1994

**I**n the midst of all the beautiful chaos in Brazil last summer, an anniversary passed with little fanfare: it has been exactly 20 years since Ireland's greatest World Cup triumph, a 1-0 win over Italy at USA '94. Today, the win remains the high-water mark for Irish football and serves primarily as a reminder of how far the national side has since fallen.

That victory in Giants Stadium brought validation to a country that had spent most of its footballing history in the wilderness. Sure, the team had made a splash at Italia '90 four years earlier, but there was something a bit, well... illegitimate about the way they had made it all the way to the quarter-finals on the back of three gritty group stage draws and a penalty shootout win. The victory over Italy, however, felt different, felt proper. Beating Roberto Baggio and co. brought with it great celebration and joy, but more importantly a sense of finally belonging. After years on the periphery, the future looked bright.

The future, however, is anything but predictable – a hard truth that permeates the island's history, sporting or otherwise – and the brave new world of a competitive, respected Irish national team never came to pass. In fact, the two decades since that famous win have been defined not by success and growth but by frustration and decay. Since 1994, Ireland have made it to just a single World Cup (in 2002) and have missed out on all the fun in France, Germany, South Africa and now Brazil. Although still some way off, PaddyPower are offering grim odds of 1/5 on Ireland not making it to Russia, either – and those lads are rarely wrong.

How has this happened? How can a country make it to three-out-of-four World Cups during the 1990s and early-2000s and then subsequently fail to qualify for any of the next three?

What makes a team drop from 6th in FIFA's world rankings to 70th in just a couple of decades? Where did it all go so wrong?

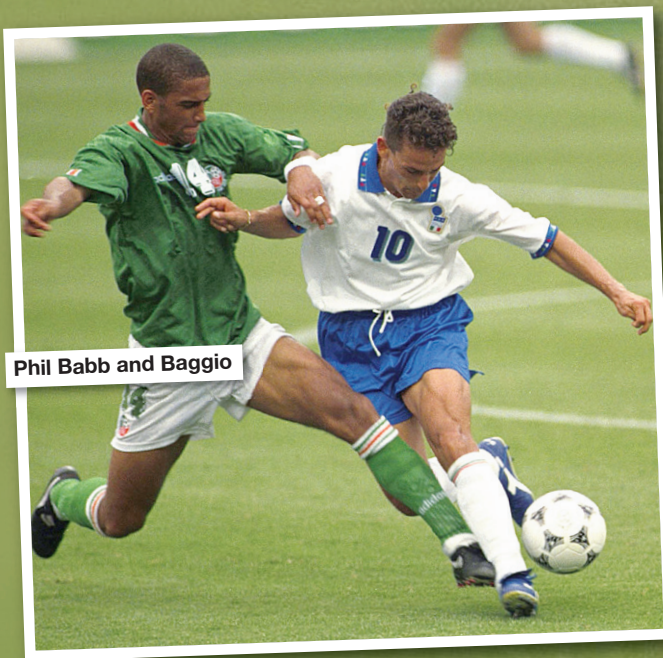
These days it's easiest to blame the managers, so let's start there. John Quincy Adams, the president of the United States of America from 1825-1829, wasn't exactly a fountain of football wisdom, but when it came to leadership he knew his onions: "If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more and be more, then you are a leader."

It therefore follows that if your actions cause others to lose hope, regress tactically and achieve nothing, then you are an Ireland manager. That statement might be a tad harsh, but you would struggle to find anyone in the coun-

try who would challenge it.

First up was Brian Kerr, who quickly built a team around a central, unshakable belief that holding onto a lead was something to be downright feared. At times it seemed as if his sole aim as Ireland manager was to dodge victory in more and more creative ways. How do you top throwing away a one-goal lead against Israel? Throw away a two-goal lead against Israel in the very next game, of course. At times it was almost admirable.

After Kerr left, the Football Association of Ireland promised a "world class" management team to replace him and lead Ireland to



Phil Babb and Baggio





Ray Houghton

South Africa in 2010.

Unfortunately they must have been using a different dictionary to the rest of us. Steve Staunton had been a popular and well-respected player for the country but had achieved nothing as a coach, bar a brief player/assistant manager position at Walsall. His appointment as Ireland manager was as underwhelming in practice as it sounds on paper. In his first competitive game he was sent to the stands, while in his second Ireland conceded five goals against Cyprus. It was all downhill from there. In case you have ever wondered how quickly it takes to tarnish an international reputation built on over 100 caps, the answer is roughly 21 months.

He was replaced by Giovanni Trapattoni,

one of the most decorated men in the game – the FAI, it seemed, had finally come through on their “world class” promise. Yet even he failed to end the country’s World Cup drought. While his record is hard to criticise (he brought Ireland to their first European Championship in nearly a quarter-century and missed out on World Cup qualification by dint of Thierry Henry’s left hand), it wasn’t long before public opinion had also turned against him. Bland defensive tactics combined poorly with his belligerent shunning of certain players – by the time of his departure last year it was nearly possible to field a full XI of banished players. His departure by mutual consent last year didn’t draw too many complaints.

While the country’s current management set-up is still in its infancy, it does highlight just how much time has passed since Ireland last played on the greatest stage. Martin O’Neill is a sensible, astute man and his appointment was widely welcomed. The real story, however, was the shocking appointment of Roy Keane as his second-in-command.

Keane infamously stormed home ahead of Ireland’s last World Cup in 2002 after an expletive-laden assault on then-manager Mick McCarthy (“I didn’t rate you as a player, I don’t rate you as a manager and I don’t rate you as a person... you can stick your World Cup up your b\*\*\*\*\*s”), and a barrage of stinging criticism about the amateur nature of the FAI and the Irish national team in general. While some applauded his sentiments and credit him with the subsequent increase in the national team’s professionalism, his actions were seen by many as an act of ultimate betrayal, as abandoning the team when it needed him most.

That he is now assistant manager of the country perfectly crystallises just how much time has passed since Ireland’s last World Cup appearance. Pigs may fly, hell may freeze over, but during that stormy summer in 2002, the idea that the FAI would one day pay Roy Keane’s wages was too bizarre to believe. We’ll have to wait and see whether or not this bizarre

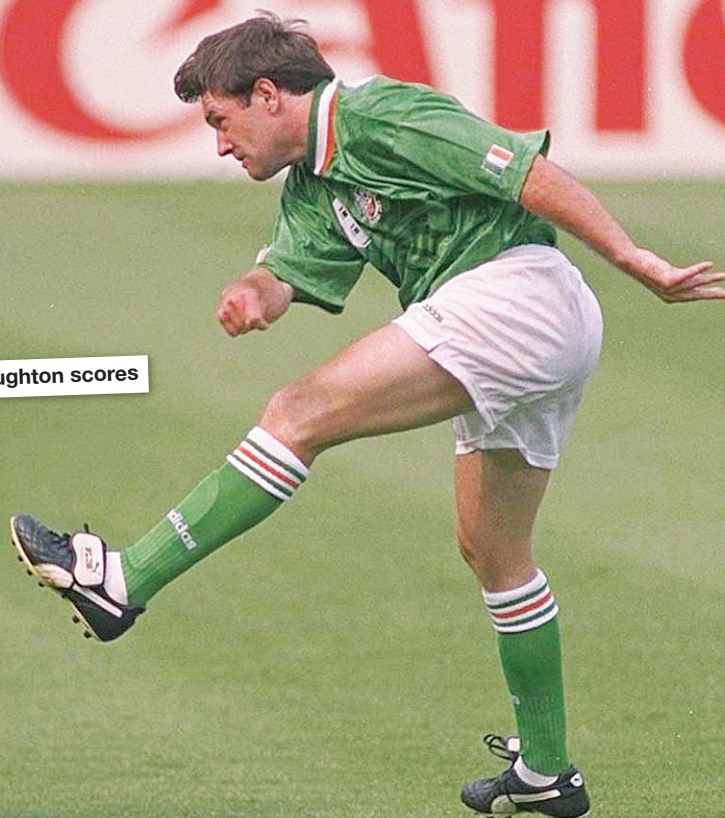


Roy Keane walks out in 2002

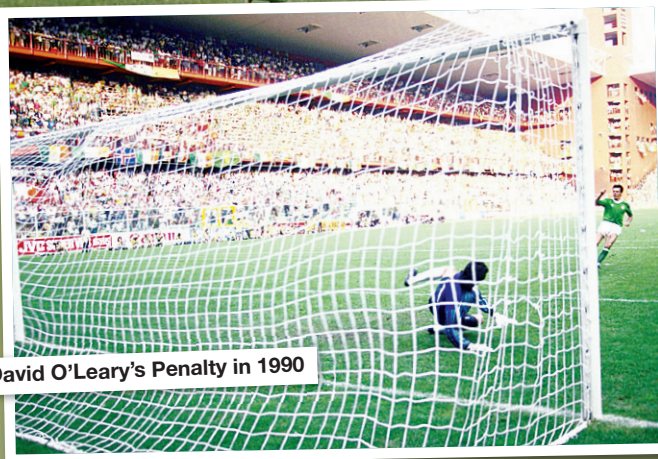




Ray Houghton scores



Robbie Keane scores in the World Cup in 2002



David O'Leary's Penalty in 1990



managerial cocktail works.

It is easy (and enjoyable) to square the blame solely on Ireland's managers, but it isn't just. International managers are the ultimate fall guys, restricted to using a group of players based on something as arbitrary as their birthplace (or, as is often the case, their granny's birthplace). The real problem lies with the players – or rather, the lack of quality players coming through. The World Cup squad in 1994 featured players who represented Liverpool, Chelsea, Leeds, Manchester United and Arsenal, as well as a host of other top division clubs in what was then a far more competitive league. The squad for Ireland's most recent competitive game, however, featured just five players who played regularly for a top-half Premier League club last season (at Everton, Newcastle and Stoke), while nine play in the English lower divisions or abroad in weaker

leagues. Part of this decline is due to the mass influx of talented foreign players to the Premier League, true, but the sad truth is that the well has run dry.

Where is the new Liam Brady, the new Paul McGrath, the new Roy Keane? Where are the young emerging players who might one day be compared to Shay Given, Robbie Keane or Damien Duff? Ireland's present squad is an uninspiring collection of earnest but technically-wanting journeymen, and there are few bright hopes for the future. What is a manager, incompetent or otherwise, to do?

A statistician might struggle to understand the hope and expectation of Irish football fans. Looking at it mathematically, Ireland's glory days during the 1990s and 2000s were anomalies – brief periods of drama and excitement in nearly a century of dour international football. O'Leary's penalty in 1990, Houghton's lob

in 1994, Keane's last-minute equalisers in 2002... no matter how validating or exhilarating they may have seemed at the time, they offer little value when looking to the future. The problem with Irish football, one starts to see, lies perhaps not with the managers or the players, but with the fans, and their demand for a level of play just beyond what is possible from a small island nation.

It has now been 12 years since Ireland last played on the greatest stage. This drought may be scoffed at by longer-suffering Scottish (16 years), Northern Irish (28 years) or Welsh (56 years) fans, but it still means that a generation of young people have grown up in the country without any Irish World Cup memories. There are people starting university who don't remember Robbie Keane's goal against Germany, never mind Ray Houghton's against Italy. And that, perhaps, is the saddest thing of all. **LI**