

KEVIN O'NEILL

# WHERE HAVE ALL THE IRISH GONE?

THE SAD DEMISE OF IRELAND'S ONCE  
RELEVANT FOOTBALLERS



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# Chapter 1

## The Demise

**A**S a teenager, Thomas Morgan, from inner-city Dublin, had Sir Alex Ferguson in his living room, trying to persuade the 15-year-old midfielder to abandon his plans to join Blackburn Rovers. They were emerging as title rivals to Ferguson's Manchester United and he was keen for Morgan to move to Old Trafford.

Morgan chose Blackburn, signing for the Ewood Park side in 1994. A year later, Blackburn won their one and only Premier League title. But despite training with the league-winning squad, and making the bench for league and European matches, Morgan found himself released – and without a club – almost three years later. It was only weeks before captaining the Ireland Under-20s to a third-place finish in the 1997 World Championships in Malaysia.

Put simply, Morgan fell by the wayside as Blackburn – and their Premier League rivals – regularly shunned the promotion of youth in favour of big-money signings. The

birth of the Premier League in 1992 ushered in an era of stellar signings, compounded by the Bosman ruling in 1995, which removed obstacles to foreign players playing in England – a double whammy which would change the fortunes of Irish players for ever. The fate of the class of '97 makes for salutary reading.

Morgan says, 'I chose Blackburn because they were on the way to the top. I did decent over there but circumstances and a couple of changes in manager eventually saw me let go, aged 20. I mean, I worked my socks off and made the bench in the Premier League and Champions League, but ultimately, I fell short. Every Irish player on the Malaysia trip has a story about the circumstances that dictated their career. In my case, I gave it everything but it wasn't to be. The Malaysia group wasn't full of stars, apart from Damien Duff, who was just so talented that it was obvious he would make it. When you look back, it's disappointing that only "Duffer" came through, but a few of the lads had brilliant careers in England – the likes of Robbie Ryan, who played hundreds of games for Millwall. But I think it shows just how hard it is in England.'

Morgan, who went for trials with Blackpool, Coventry City and Rochdale before returning to Ireland with St Patrick's Athletic, was captain of a barely fancied Irish squad – of which 16 were contracted to English clubs – that travelled to the Under-20 World Championships. Few people expected Ireland to do well and hopes were hardly raised when they lost the opening group match, against Ghana. But they responded by beating USA, 2-1, and a draw against China qualified the Irish for the last 16, where they triumphed, after extra time, against Morocco.

The Irish, managed by future senior team manager Brian Kerr, then beat a fancied Spanish side in the quarter-finals. Trevor Molloy, who spent the previous League of Ireland season with lowly Athlone Town, scored the decisive goal from the penalty spot. Molloy and defender Aidan Lynch were the only members of the squad playing in Ireland, while the Spanish side included three players – David Albelda, Miguel Angel Angulo and Gerard – that progressed to great success in La Liga with Valencia.

Ireland eventually lost to the tournament winners, Argentina, in the semi-finals, but unbowed they beat Ghana in the third-place play-off.

The players could be proud of a phenomenal achievement, but back in England they found themselves part of an English game rapidly accruing millions of pounds through increased television and sponsorship rights and gate receipts. The league had rapidly outgrown its former self. And for the top clubs, the discontinuation of UEFA's three-foreigner rule in European competitions had allowed them to cast their net far and wide, and to look towards purchasing foreign talent, often at the expense of players from England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales, from where the bulk of English football's pre-Premier League stars had once come.

Only 13 foreign players (from outside Great Britain and Ireland) took to the field on the opening weekend of the Premier League, in 1992. But by the time Morgan and his Irish colleagues were expected to impact the Premier League, at the turn of the century, players from outside Great Britain and Ireland were starting to form the bulk of each team's starting XI, with the number of foreign players participating in the Premier League, by

the year 2000, reaching almost 40 per cent of the total. Additionally, many substitutes' benches in the Premier League were largely occupied by foreign players.

Their increasing presence laid down a challenge that the bulk of young Irish players would fail to meet, as the Premier League left them behind to become the richest league in Europe, a mantle held in the 1980s and early 1990s by Italy's Serie A.

The case of Dublin's Micky Cummins, a midfielder who played in all of Ireland's seven matches in Malaysia, scoring twice, was indicative of how youth team players were pushed aside in the cash-rich Premier League. Cummins had signed for Middlesbrough in the mid-1990s but they, along with Chelsea, were among the frontrunners in investing in foreign players. His arrival on Teesside coincided with the club experiencing a significant upturn in its financial fortunes, with the money generated from their promotion from the second tier backed up by heavy investment from local businessman, Steve Gibson.

The club's financial position enabled it and its famous player-manager Bryan Robson to dabble extensively in the foreign market, while also attracting established English players like Paul Gascoigne, Paul Ince, Paul Merson and Irish international Andy Townsend. Established players of their ilk were not going to be left on the sidelines in favour of promising youths.

Just before Cummins's signing, Middlesbrough also signed the Brazilian playmaker Juninho, and in the Irishman's four seasons there, which amounted to two senior appearances, Middlesbrough splashed out just under £15m in signing players for Cummins's midfield position.

He also had to compete with other fine midfielders who were at the club before his signing, including former Manchester United pair Clayton Blackmore and Bryan Robson. Middlesbrough's overseas recruitment soon went into overdrive, as Italian striker Fabrizio Ravanelli arrived for a club record £7m. Other foreign stars, like Brazilians Branco and Emerson (a midfielder) and Danish striker Mikkell Beck, soon pitched up at Boro, as they and other Premier League clubs spent lavishly – and often.

The Premier League's hunt for the world's best players eventually led to Chelsea becoming the first English club to field an all-foreign starting XI in the Premier League, in a 1999 fixture against Southampton. Ten years later, Arsenal became the first to name an all-foreign matchday squad in the Premier League (then 16 players), and by that point the average number of foreign players in Premier League squads stood at 13.

The top clubs, and even newly ambitious ones like Middlesbrough, were unprepared to wait for the likes of Cummins to fulfil their promise. And in 2000, Cummins eventually signed for Port Vale, playing over 250 times for the Valiants before finishing his career with Darlington, Rotherham and Grimsby Town.

Some of the most promising defenders from the 1997 Malaysia squad, namely Colin Hawkins and David Worrell, encountered similar problems at Coventry City and Blackburn Rovers respectively, both established Premier League clubs.

Worrell signed for Blackburn in 1995, just after Kenny Dalglish had led the club to the Premier League title. Blackburn were basking in the glow of the Premier League era and through the financial contributions of



local businessman, Jack Walker, had become one of the country's leading forces, capable of twice breaking the English transfer record for the signings of Chris Sutton and Alan Shearer.

When Worrell signed, Blackburn had a defensive roster that had cost, in the previous three years, approximately £15m. Among those signed in that period was the Dubliner Jeff Kenna, a £1.5m investment from Southampton, while established defenders Henning Berg (who later played for Manchester United), Stéphane Henchoz (a future Liverpool player), Colin Hendry, Ian Pearce and Paul Warhurst made it extremely hard for emerging defenders to break into the Blackburn side. Frustrated and very much on the fringes, Worrell left for Dundee United in 1999 without making a single first-team appearance.

In his two seasons with Coventry, from 1995, Colin Hawkins was kept adrift of the first team by a succession of players costing over £1m, including former Liverpool player David Burrows and Irish internationals Gary Breen and Liam Daish, who had signed from Birmingham City for a combined £4m.

Meanwhile, Neale Fenn, the 1997 squad's most promising attacker, faced an almost impossible task to get into the Tottenham Hotspur side in a six-year period at White Hart Lane. Despite making his first-team debut in 1995, Fenn was never going to oust club legend Teddy Sheringham from the support striker role, a position Sheringham would occupy between 1992 and 1997, before transferring to Manchester United.

Spurs were also unafraid to spend large amounts on strikers, recruiting Chris Armstrong from Crystal Palace

for a club record £4.5m in 1995. In the next two years, they signed Les Ferdinand and Steffen Iversen, both international players, for a total outlay of £8.5m. The year before Fenn departed, for Peterborough United, Spurs' spending on forwards intensified further with the £11m purchase of Serhiy Rebrov from Dynamo Kiev.

Then there was John Burns, who played alongside Morgan in the Irish midfield. He was expected to enjoy a successful career, having debuted for Nottingham Forest in 1999. Tipped to follow in the footsteps of Roy Keane, who blazed a trail for Forest before transferring to Manchester United, Burns's route to the first team was consistently blocked by a series of big-money signings and by the occupation of the midfield positions by more senior players.

He spent five years with Forest, from 1994, but managed just four first-team appearances as Forest enjoyed something of a renaissance under Frank Clark, finishing third in the 1994/95 Premier League. In Burns's time at the club, he watched, talent unfulfilled, as Forest splurged over £10m on midfielders, while the consistency of more trusted players, like Lars Bohinen and David Phillips, meant that breaking into the side was improbable. Burns finally left for Bristol City, and retired in 2005.

As if the Class of '97 didn't have enough obstacles to overcome, their efforts to fulfil their potential were not helped by the arrival of so many foreign players to England, from senior to academy/youth level, as the implications of the controversial Bosman ruling, which came into being in December 1995, hit young Irish players hard.

In essence, the ruling prevented restrictions on foreign EU players in national football leagues and permitted players within the EU to move to another club at the end of a contract without a transfer fee being paid. The case came about when Jean-Marc Bosman, a fairly unheralded Belgian midfielder, wanted to move to Dunkerque, a French side, after his contract expired at RFC Liège in 1990. Liège asked Dunkerque for a transfer fee, which the French outfit refused, and when Liège relegated Bosman to their reserve team, on reduced wages, he took his case to the courts.

In England, transfer tribunals had been used since 1981 to resolve disputes over transfer fees between clubs when transferring players at the conclusion of contracts. But the Bosman ruling made a player free to leave his club as soon as his contract expired.

The player, essentially, became all-powerful and could demand a princely signing-on fee and salary from his new club, on the basis that his new club had no transfer fee to pay.

Because clubs were permitted to play as many foreign players from within the EU as they liked, after Bosman, achievements that were improbable before the ruling became more realistic. For example, when Manchester United won a dramatic UEFA Champions League Final against Bayern Munich in 1999, only five of the 13 players that featured in the Old Trafford side could have played prior to Bosman.

Dr Raffaele Poli is the co-founder and head of the Football Observatory, a research group based in Switzerland that specialises in the demographic analysis of the football labour market. One of Dr Poli's most

intriguing studies was his analysis of 'Labour Market Migration to the Five Major Leagues in European Football'. The objective of the study was to understand which leagues, clubs and players have taken advantage of the gradual opening-up of the football labour market in Europe. Drawing on statistical data from the Football Observatory, Dr Poli's study showed that the presence of foreign players in the major European leagues has increased remarkably over the last couple of decades. It also showed that the percentage of non-EU players as a cohort within the total number of foreign players has grown.

'The percentage of foreign players amongst 98 clubs in the best five European leagues (Italy, England, Spain, Germany and France) rose from 20.2 per cent in 1995/1996 to 38.6 per cent ten seasons later,' says Dr Poli.

Perhaps it's simply a question, then, of putting in place rules to limit their employment. Dr Poli, however, isn't sure that this is the right answer, unless it is accompanied by decisions to encourage the training and development of local players. He used the examples of player development in France and Switzerland as admirable models to consider for major clubs.

'The example of France, in which the presence of foreign players is the lowest and the number of local players playing abroad is the highest, shows that with a proper plan you can develop top players within Europe and not just in poor continents. The comparison between England and France shows that the presence of foreign players is not a mere consequence linked with economic reasons (the lower training costs in other continents) or the stock of human capital (the largest availability

of talented young players willing to play football), but it is the result of different youth player training and development policies adopted in the last decades. The obligation of having a proper training centre in every professional French club dates back to 1973. Although this requirement was repealed in 2003 by the initiative of the top clubs, in the current economic context most of the French clubs have an interest to continue to train and develop young players in order to continue to benefit from the competitive advantage gained over the last decade.

‘The Swiss case is also very interesting as it shows how the policies adopted by the football federation have improved the quality of training and developing local players. Since the late 1990s, the Swiss Football League has created a tax on transfers between domestic clubs and redistributed it amongst the clubs on the basis of youth academies’ quality. Since the season 2007/08 the Swiss Football League has also rewarded clubs in the Challenge League, the second Swiss professional football division, that employ players below 21 years old and have been trained locally for at least three years in a Swiss club since the age of 15. In addition, the Swiss Football Association invests part of the national team revenues for the training and development of young players and, based on the French system, has created two pre-training academies. The good results obtained by Swiss national selections at youth level show, regardless of the presence of foreign players, that success can be partially planned. Currently, 29 footballers trained in Switzerland play in the five major European leagues, placing this small country in sixth place amongst the nations exporting football players to top elite clubs.’

So, why don't English clubs simply adopt the Swiss model? Dr Poli explains, 'It is also true that the financial strength of English clubs, the strong presence of foreign investors and the existence of global transfer networks that enrich all the main stakeholders, from players to agents to clubs, make it difficult to adopt policies similar to the French or Swiss. However, the development of appropriate youth systems are critical for the future.'

Sadly, there appears to be very few indicators that the powerful Premier League clubs are open to changing their approach to transfers and recruitment. For example, when the former English Football Association (FA) chairman, Greg Dyke, spoke (in March 2015) about a need to subdue the number of foreign players in England, Arsène Wenger, the manager of Arsenal, quickly countered by saying that players should earn the right to play in the Premier League through quality rather than their place of birth.

Mr Dyke was not the first member of English football's hierarchy to express concerns over the approach of clubs to young players. In 2007, the Professional Footballers' Association (PFA), worried about the dearth of English and home-based players breaking into Premier League sides from the academy system, published a report called 'Meltdown: The Nationality of Premier League Players and the Future of English Football'. The report provided a revealing analysis of the effect overseas players had on the English game between 1992/93 (the first Premier League season) and the 2006/07 season.

It pointed out that 498 players started Premier League matches in the 2006/07 season, of which only 191 were English, a decrease of some 47 per cent since the Premier League began. Though Irish, Scottish and Welsh players

didn't figure in this particular statistic, one can undoubtedly surmise what the negative trend meant for them.

In the report, the PFA chief executive, Gordon Taylor OBE, says: 'A Premier League club can spend £2m a season on its youth system, as some do, without expecting any players to emerge from it. Having spent so much on developing young players, is it acceptable that most of the fruits of this expenditure have their path to the Premier League blocked by their clubs repeatedly buying older, ready-made players? Any good business invests in research and development. But our business has researched and developed young players – and then blocked their way to the top.'

In 2006/07, for the first time, the number of overseas players starting Premier League games overtook the number of home-grown players – that is, players from England, Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, Scotland and Wales, leading Mr Taylor to describe the Premier League as 'a finishing school for the rest of the world, at the expense of our own players'.

'Nobody disputes the right of foreign players to play in England,' he says. 'On the contrary, they are some of the most welcome guests our game has ever had. They brought training and lifestyle ideas ahead of our own and broke down prejudice and national stereotypes. They set standards that have been as good for our society as they have been for our game and given tremendous pleasure to fans. But the price of the unrestricted flow of foreign players into England has been the loss of a generation of players.'

Meanwhile, new work permit rules were introduced to English football in May 2015, with the new requirements

stating that non-EEA (European Economic Area) players will have to meet a minimum percentage of international matches played for their country over the previous 24-month period, as determined by that country's FIFA world ranking.

Crucially, in my opinion, the rules mean, in theory, that only the best non-EU players will be granted permission to play in England, while Premier League clubs, I suggest, must be more vigilant when considering the long-term consequences of signing a non-British / Irish player, as in the 2013/14 season, 92 of the 373 non-British / Irish players used played in fewer than ten games.

Is there really any point signing non-British / Irish players just to sit on the bench? And would it not make greater football and financial sense to allocate such 'squad' roles to players from their own academies? The FA estimates that over 30 per cent of players granted English working visas under the old system, before the introduction of the new rules in May 2015, will not succeed under the new rules, and it will be fascinating to see the reaction of the top clubs to the new regulations.

Before leaving his role as chairman of the FA in 2016, Mr Dyke had insisted that nobody wanted to stop the world's best players coming to England, such as the likes of Dennis Bergkamp, Gianfranco Zola and Patrick Vieira, but he had a desire to stall the arrival of 'bog-standard players'.

Mr Dyke, however, and indeed any individual, could never change the face of English football alone. In my opinion, the Premier League big-hitters will always be reluctant to see sweeping changes to the current status quo, while at the heart of the matter, I believe, is the fact



that English football has, thus far, demonstrated little quality control in dealing with foreign and, in particular, non-EU player transfers into the country.

And that doesn't just apply to the Premier League, as by the summer of 2012, for example, 163 of the 699 players that featured in the previous season's Football League Championship (second tier) were foreign. Therefore, is it not acceptable to suggest that foreign player quotas, applicable to the three professional divisions below the Premier League, are completely necessary if players from Great Britain and Ireland are to get greater first-team opportunities in years to come?

It was not always like this though, and to understand more about the current situation, it is useful to compare it to the past, not for reasons of mere nostalgia, but to understand the roots of the current malaise.

Although the Football Association of Ireland (FAI) was not officially formed until 1921 and became affiliated to the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) two years later, organised football in Ireland (including in the north and south) dates back to 1878, when the Belfast merchant John McAlery brought the game back to Ireland from a trip abroad. He later formed Cliftonville Football Club and they became – and remain – members of the Irish Football Association, which was founded in 1880 to oversee the organisation of football, both north and south of the border. The League of Ireland was later formed, in 1921, a few months before the formation of the FAI and following the partition of Ireland.

By then the relationship between Irish football players and English clubs had started. For example, the first

recorded instance of an Irish player joining Manchester United (then called Newton Heath) occurred in 1893 when forward John Peden (Linfield, Northern Ireland) moved across the Irish Sea.

The transfer of Irish players to England for transfer fees began in the ensuing years, before Belfast Celtic's Mickey Hamill joined Manchester United in 1910 for a fee of £175.

In the early stages of the 20th century, Wexford's Bill Lacey and Elisha Scott (Belfast) also featured prominently in some of Liverpool's earliest league title wins.

For English clubs, dabbling in the Irish transfer market was a no-brainer, as the Irish came ready and relatively cheap. And their strengths were perfectly tailored to the rough and tumble of English football.

Since the conclusion of World War II in 1945, and up until recently, only Scotland had provided more players to the English leagues than Ireland; a point highlighted by Dr Patrick McGovern, a lecturer in sociology at the London School of Economics and Political Science, through his informative body of research on foreign footballers in the English leagues, 1946 to 1995.

And although English clubs now recruit from every corner of the globe, the flow of young Irish players to England has remained steady, even if most of these players never get near first-team football, and the overall trend of Irish players pursuing the dream of 'making it' in English football continues unabated in the 21st century and, one imagines, will not diminish in the near future.

At the beginning of the 2013/14 English league season, there were 229 registered players – including reserve and youth team players – eligible to play for the Republic of

Ireland, who were attached to clubs in England's four professional leagues.

Of those 229 players, 153 were born in the Republic of Ireland; a further six (Shane Duffy, Paul George, Darron Gibson, James McClean, Eunan O'Kane and Marc Wilson) were born within the six counties of Northern Ireland; while two others (Noe Baba and Sean Maguire) were born in Cameroon and England respectively but were raised in Ireland and, subsequently, class themselves (and rightly so) as Irish.

And yet, at the same time, three English Premier League clubs (Chelsea, Southampton and Swansea City) had no Irish players in the 2013/14 season, including at youth/academy level, and there were no Irish players in the first-team squads at Manchester United, Manchester City, Chelsea, Arsenal and Tottenham Hotspur – the Premier League's top five at the conclusion of the 2012/13 season.

Everton, who finished sixth in 2012/13, included Seamus Coleman (Donegal) and Darron Gibson (Derry) in their squad, and have since signed Irish internationals James McCarthy and Aiden McGeady; both were born in Scotland before opting to represent Ireland.

Both McCarthy and McGeady are important players for Martin O'Neill, who was appointed senior team manager of the Republic of Ireland in 2013. In his playing career, O'Neill honed his midfield skills in his hometown, Derry, and played 64 times for Northern Ireland, including at the 1982 World Cup, where he captained the side to the quarter-finals.

He played almost 300 times for Nottingham Forest, between 1971 and 1981, when they were among the big-

hitters in English football, winning the league title and two European Cups between 1977 and 1980.

And he told me, while pondering why Irish players no longer play for England's major clubs: 'When I went to England, in the early 1970s, it was a time when players from Ireland, both north and south, were not only playing for top English sides but instead were highly influential players for their clubs. You look at Pat Jennings, Sammy McIlroy, Sammy Nelson and Pat Rice from the north, and Liam Brady, David O'Leary and Frank Stapleton from the south – they were very important stars for their clubs. You look at Ronnie Whelan, for Liverpool, and he was a key figure in some significant moments in Liverpool's history. There were many influential Scottish players, too.'

Though the first non-British / Irish-born player to feature in England's top division was Tottenham's Max Seeburg in 1908, England's top flight was dominated by British and Irish players until the inception of the Premier League in 1992.

Historically, both Liverpool and Manchester United, the most trophy-laden institutions in English football, consistently boasted a healthy smattering of Irish players – even during the most triumphant moments in their histories.

For example, when Liverpool won the English First Division in 1980, their 12th league crown, they led a top four consisting of runners-up Manchester United, Ipswich Town and Arsenal. Between those teams there were seven Irish-born players, including four (Liam Brady, John Devine, David O'Leary and Frank Stapleton) at the top London side, Arsenal. Another two players (Ipswich's Kevin O'Callaghan and the then Liverpool and future

Everton player, Kevin Sheedy) were born in England but eligible to represent Ireland.

Ten years later, as Liverpool again won the league, five Irish-born players (Liverpool's Steve Staunton and Ronnie Whelan; Aston Villa's Paul McGrath; and Arsenal's David O'Leary and Niall Quinn) featured for teams to finish in the top four. Arsenal fringe player Kwame Ampadu was born in England but relocated to Ireland at a young age while Liverpool's John Aldridge and Ray Houghton, Aston Villa's Tony Cascarino and Tottenham's Chris Hughton were born in either England or Scotland and held the right to play for Ireland.

But fast forward to the end of the 2012/13 season and the Irish were only noticeable in top-four clubs by their complete absence.

By the 2009/2010 season, observers were seeing genuinely worrying signs about the significance of Irish players to leading English clubs. Chelsea won the Premier League with no Irish players in their first team, though Dubliner Conor Clifford was a regular for their reserves. Clifford has since dropped down the league ranks and returned to League of Ireland football in 2017.

Runners-up Manchester United, meanwhile, had two Irishmen (Darron Gibson and John O'Shea) but third-placed Arsenal had none, while Tottenham Hotspur, in fourth, had Robbie Keane as their sole representative from this part of the world.

If one delved further into the gut of these four clubs, in the 2009/10 season, the trend of looking elsewhere for young talent – other than Ireland – was highly evident from a varied list of nationalities represented in their squads.

For example, Arsenal's first-team squad contained players from Brazil, Cameroon, Ivory Coast, Mexico, Poland and Russia. The Tottenham squad, for the same season, boasted players from Honduras, Iceland, Mexico, Russia and Sweden. English clubs, it seemed, were reaching out – but turning a cold shoulder to the Emerald Isle.

By the 2013/14 season, the multinational make-up of English club squads was even more diverse. Chelsea's first-team squad included players from Australia, Egypt, Senegal and Serbia, while Arsenal had a Japanese player, Ryo Miyaichi. Manchester City and Liverpool had, among others, players from Argentina, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Ghana, Montenegro, Morocco, Nigeria and Uruguay. None of the aforementioned four clubs had any Irish players in their first-team squads and if one looked to the underbelly in each club – the reserve and youth teams – the relevance of Irish players appeared fairly insignificant with neither Chelsea nor Arsenal having one Irish-born player in the ranks.

In the Chelsea reserves, in 2013/14, were players from Burkina Faso, Chile, Colombia, Ghana, Nigeria and Uruguay, while Arsenal's reserves (for the same season) contained players from Argentina, Bolivia, Macedonia and Rwanda. Liverpool and Manchester City had three Irish players (combined), including the goalkeeper Ian Lawlor at the latter. Lawlor, however, has since dropped down the divisions to England's fourth tier.

But again, the tendency for English clubs – from senior level down to the academies – to look far and wide for young recruits was completely obvious by the fact that 20 countries, from four continents, were represented in

the reserve teams of Liverpool and Manchester City (in 2013/14).

Make no mistake, the top English clubs cut no corners in finding the best young players in the world and they saturate the foreign market with their own coaching academies, usually run in the summer to teach children in other parts of the world how to play ‘the Chelsea Way’ or ‘the Liverpool Way’.

They send coaching delegations to Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand, where Chelsea host International Soccer Schools, or to China, India and South Africa, where Manchester United do likewise. Arsenal and Liverpool are also prominent in countries across Asia and Africa, with Arsenal holding regular Soccer Schools in a host of US locations from Connecticut to Florida and New York to Washington.

In an interview with Tony Leen for the *Irish Examiner*, having just announced his retirement from his academy role at Arsenal, the former Ireland midfielder Liam Brady says: ‘We [Arsenal] probably have around 20 scouts on the payroll around the world and they’re very good. The likes of Gilles Grimandi in France would have pushed for Sagna, Koscielny, Sanogo, Giroud. You scout every corner of the globe. You have to. Because if there’s a great 16-year-old in Argentina, you can bet your life Manchester City will also know about him.’

The level of difficulty in emerging from the raft of youth and reserve team players to become a first-team player is difficult to quantify, as are the exact numbers of Irish players going to England each year, either for trials or to sign permanently, as the Football Association of Ireland doesn’t have an organised database for recording

the information. But according to Eoin Hand, a former Ireland player and manager, anywhere between 20 and 25 Irish players sign with English clubs every year. Hand is certainly in the know. A former player with Portsmouth and manager of Huddersfield Town, he was employed by the FAI from 1999 to 2012, initially as a career guidance officer with a mandate to help young players going to or coming back from English clubs.

His role was expanded in 2004 with the former Drumcondra star taking on the role of football support services manager, which included advising Irish clubs in negotiations with overseas clubs looking to sign young Irish players.

Eoin told me that the instances of Irish players moving to England increased dramatically in the wake of the success of Brian Kerr's underage international sides in the late 1990s, when Irish teams won the UEFA Under-16 and Under-18 European Championships and finished third at the 1997 World Youth Championships.

'You had about 20 players, more or less, going annually before then. But when English clubs noticed Brian Kerr's teams, the figure rose to between 30 and 35 per year, for an eight-to-ten-year period from the late 1990s. The figure has levelled off again in recent years to between 20 and 25 per year. Sure, it's become more difficult to make it with the really top clubs but I would say that, contrary to media sensationalism, about 80 per cent of our players manage to progress to make a good career in the English game. It's not always with the club they signed for initially. In fact, it rarely is. But the figure of players remaining in English football, where they enjoy lengthy and fruitful careers, is greater than people imagine,' says Hand.



‘However,’ he adds, ‘it has become far more difficult for young players to make the grade at the top clubs. They are recruiting from a worldwide base and buying ready-made stars.

‘We don’t see many cases like Gerry Daly, John Giles, Ashley Grimes, Frank Stapleton, Liam Brady, Ronnie Whelan and many more – all lads that went to top English clubs and made a big impact.’

Notwithstanding the fact that at least 20 Irish players join English clubs each year, the demise of Irish players has been such that by 2013, Ireland had fallen from the second most prolific supplier of players to England’s top flight to the fourth. Scotland, once leading the way, had slumped to seventh.

Due to the decreasing chances of Irish players breaking into the first teams in England’s top flight, the natural result is that more and more Irish players are dropping into the lower divisions and, in some cases, transferring to Scottish clubs, where the standard of the top division is undoubtedly less skilled than in England’s glamorous Premier League.

Again, the statistics make for depressing reading. On the opening day of the 2013/14 English Football League season (for the second, third and fourth tiers), 39 Irish-born players started matches for teams in the English Championship, League 1 and League 2, while only ten Irish-born players took to the field on the opening day of the 2013/14 Premier League season.

Fourteen Irish-born players made ten or more appearances for Premier League teams in the 2013/14 season with a further eight Irish-qualified players (born outside Ireland) also doing so.

But none of those 22 players (including those born outside Ireland) played for teams that finished in the top four, while only five featured for teams that finished the season in the top half of the Premier League. Furthermore, only six Irish-born players played 30 or more games for Premier League clubs in the 2013/14 season, with an additional three Irish-qualified players (born outside Ireland) reaching that mark.

The figures for the English Championship (second tier) were very different with 25 Irish-born players and a further 16 Irish-qualified players making ten or more first-team appearances in the 2013/14 season. Seventeen of the 25 Irish-born players reached the 30-plus threshold for the season while nine Irish-qualified players (born outside Ireland) did likewise.

Martin O'Neill and the FAI have no reason not to be cognisant of the diminishing importance of Irish players. O'Neill, for example, could only name three players born on the island and under the age of 25 (Robbie Brady, Seamus Coleman and James McClean) when selecting his first Irish squad, in November 2013, while as if to illustrate a paucity of new talent coming into the senior side, Ireland (at that time) were still reliant on the country's all-time leading goalscorer, Robbie Keane (then 34 and playing in the United States) for the majority of their goals. However, when I got the opportunity to speak briefly with the FAI chief executive officer, John Delaney in July 2014, he appeared less perturbed by the shortage of Irish players turning out for England's top sides.

'I think it's a concern for England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales. The English Premier League, as we all know, is dominated by foreign players, coaches and club

owners, and that's in line with the overall globalisation of the game. We're talking around 70 per cent of Premier League players not coming from the traditional source, the so-called Home Nations, but within all that, Ireland has some very good players operating at an elite level in England,' he says.

He pointed to Ireland's quartet of Everton players, including James McCarthy and Aiden McGeady, whose football educations had been spent in their country of birth, Scotland.

However, Seamus Coleman's selection for the 2013/14 Professional Footballers' Association (PFA) Team of the Year was the first time an Irish player had made the exclusive selection since Richard Dunne – as an Aston Villa player – in 2009/10. Other than Coleman and Dunne, only six Irish players have made the Team of the Year since the turn of the century.

Irish players are also making minimal impact on the scoresheet in the Premier League, with Everton right-back Coleman and Shane Long (then of Hull City) top-scoring with seven goals in the 2013/14 season. Stoke City's Jon Walters (born in England) was the only other Irish-qualified player to score five goals in the season.

Martin O'Neill said he remains hopeful that the Irish will re-emerge in England's top league, but all the while more and more Irish players attached to Premier League clubs are being 'loaned' to lower league clubs, usually on the premise of gaining much-needed first-team experience. Unlike in some continental countries, most specifically in Italy where the loan market has been rampant for some time, the use of the loan system by English clubs only took off around the summer of 2007.

Between ten transfer windows from the summer of 2009 to January 2014, 136 Irish-born players were involved in loan moves between clubs in England (some more than once). Generally, the movement involved Premier League or Championship players transferring, for a set period of time, to clubs in the lower leagues.

To illustrate the relatively new-found buoyancy of England's loan market, the previous ten transfer windows (summer 2004 to January 2009) saw just 41 Irish-born players involved in loan moves.

Sometimes young players are 'loaned' with the intention of gaining worthwhile experience in a competitive environment. That's one way for young players to view such moves and is something with which to console themselves at an uncertain juncture in their careers.

In reality though, the vast majority of players loaned from clubs in England's top two divisions to lower league clubs rarely return to long-term careers with their parent clubs. More likely, a loan move to a lower league club is the first step in preparing players for their eventual release or permanent transfer from the parent club. Such transfers inevitably see the previously 'loaned' player sign permanently for a lower league club, thus joining a stockpile of Irish players deemed surplus to requirements at the top and only good enough for a lesser standard.

The impact this has on Irish players is most noticeable at international level when players of limited quality are asked to perform against world-class talent on the international stage.

In many such cases, it is simply asking too much of the players to raise their game sufficiently and hold their own

against opposing players that compete, week in, week out, in some of Europe's top divisions.

For example, how can Ireland expect second tier players to one week compete against journeymen Championship midfielders and then against the cream of Europe's midfield talent like Andrés Iniesta (Barcelona), Luka Modrić (Real Madrid) and Andrea Pirlo (Juventus), all of whom excelled against a limited Irish team at the 2014 European Championships? Yes, the Irish players will never be short on perspiration, pride and desire. But it is plainly asking too much of them to compete with the very best at international level.

Before recently rejoining the top 30 in the official FIFA rankings, the Irish team had slid alarmingly from a peak position of sixth, in 1993, to its lowest ever placing (70th) in July 2014.

When Ireland qualified for the country's first ever appearance at a major international finals, the 1988 European Championships, the squad boasted three players from Liverpool, two from Manchester United and one from Arsenal. There was one player each from Everton, Newcastle United and Tottenham Hotspur, while three players were attached to Celtic in Scotland. The squad contained just two players from England's second tier: David Kelly (Walsall) and Gerry Peyton (Bournemouth).

Two years later, when Jack Charlton's Ireland qualified for the 1990 World Cup, the squad still contained three Liverpool players. Two came from Aston Villa while Arsenal, Everton and Tottenham Hotspur supplied a player apiece. Celtic were again represented by two players.

By the time Ireland competed at the 1994 World Cup in the United States, the squad included four players

operating in England's second tier; however, it still contained players from some of England's most renowned clubs including two from Manchester United and Manchester City, three from Aston Villa, and one apiece from Arsenal, Chelsea, Leeds United and Liverpool. Two players were also performing in Scotland's top flight.

By 2002, though, when Ireland travelled to the World Cup in Japan and South Korea, Manchester United were still represented in the squad (by Roy Keane) but his premature departure left the squad with no players from the top four clubs in the Premier League (Manchester United, Arsenal, Liverpool and Newcastle United).

Instead, six clubs that finished tenth or lower in the 2001/02 Premier League season were represented in the squad. And when Ireland next appeared at a major tournament in 2012, six of the squad were registered to English second tier clubs.

Damningly, Aaron Callaghan, who played for Stoke City in the 1980s and is now a respected coach in Ireland, says that the fortunes of Irish players, and those of the national team, are unlikely to change.

'It's not going to change for Irish players. It's difficult enough to get young English players into Premier League teams – never mind young Irish ones. And it's hard to imagine the situation changing in the near future,' he says.

Whatever major events occur in English football in the next few years, they are likely to happen without the input of Irish players, who are not yet a dying breed in English football but are, most definitely, an ever-dwindling force.

A source for hope is the emergence of a clear desire from the English FA to implement change to the way

Premier League clubs produce and give opportunities to home-grown players. Of course, any changes would be motivated mainly by a desire to secure a better future for the England team. Yet, if some of the proposals put forward by the now departed chairman Mr Dyke, which are too plentiful to examine in full here, are eventually ushered in, they could, almost by accident, aid the cause of Irish players.

Before then, however, Ireland and the FAI need to help themselves. Later, I will look at proposals to change the way that Irish children are taught to play the game. First, though, it is imperative to remind ourselves of the players from Ireland's rich football past, who once propelled the country to the front of people's minds when considering football, as these players can teach us valuable lessons about what it takes to reach – and to remain – at the very top level in the game.