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DECISION: Mark Sykes last week declared himself eligible to play for the Republic

Like identity, sport allegiance is a matter of the heart

Chris DONNELLY

FOR many long years, my father refused to take a day off work. When you own a small business, holiday leave and downtime are luxuries most simply cannot afford to consider.

At some point when I was a teenager, he began taking Wednesday afternoons off. The choice of day and time was no accident. Back in the early 1990s, the absence of floodlights at Lansdowne Road meant that all Republic of Ireland home matches were played during the day, with competitive fixtures reserved for Wednesday afternoons.

In the years that followed, my brother and I would be collected early from school on international day so that we could enjoy watching the game at home with him. I use the word 'enjoy' loosely because invariably the matches were tense affairs, with nerves frayed until the final whistle sounded.

I began going to Ireland matches regularly soon after with friends, organising tickets and transport arrangements. On one occasion these arrangements involved walking along one of the canals after closing time in the bars before loitering for hours outside Connolly Station awaiting the first train home as a cold autumn night froze into morning.

Like identity, sport allegiance is a matter of the heart. I follow teams across many sporting disciplines, but none come close to how I feel about the Republic of Ireland team. A quarter century later, my brother still makes the journey south with me on international nights, with my son now joining us.

Over a decade ago, the Irish Football Association (IFA) foolishly attempted to lobby football's governing authority, Fifa, to prevent northerners from opting to play for the Republic.

The move provoked an outcry, with many involved in the northern association demonstrating a remarkable lack of insight into how their neighbours sharing this same contested land think and feel.

I attended a meeting with the IFA as part of a Sinn Féin delegation at the time, and can still recall leaving utterly bewildered by their inability to appreciate the significance of what they were attempting to do.

Partition created a sporting fracture that left Ireland punching below its weight for generations at the world's most popular game. The formation of the new Irish Free State team alongside the Belfast-based Ireland team meant that, for just over a quarter of a century, two international Ireland sides competed for the same players who, remarkably, could opt to play for both – as Donegal-born striker Jimmy Kelly managed to do within the same week in March 1936.

The era of dual international players would eventually be brought to an end by Fifa in the early 1950s, forcing players to make a choice.

In more recent times, a number of Derry-born players have represented the Republic with considerable success, including Shane Duffy and James McClean.

Mark Sykes's decision last week to declare himself eligible to play for the Republic means that Belfast may soon have a representative when the Boys in Green take the field for the first time since Jimmy McAlinden, Jackie Vernon and Jackie Brown donned the colours.

One of the arguments put forward by those objecting to Irish youngsters exercising the right to choose which international team to represent is that players like Mark Sykes and others wanting to represent the Republic of Ireland should not accept places within the IFA's underage teams.

If that call was to be taken seriously, then the northern football authorities would have absolutely no grounds to complain if the Dublin-based FAI established underage development centres across the north as it would be compelled to do in order to meet the demand. That would be a nightmare for the Northern Ireland set-up, leaving them in a much worse position than they are under existing practices.

A more prudent course of action for the Irish FA would be to recognise that it has the advantage of being the established body within the north, and that its sole strategy must be to try to encourage and persuade youngsters to turn out for Northern Ireland, knowing that it will lose some along the way.

Demographic realities mean that this problem will only become more pronounced in the time ahead, and that will necessitate hard decisions on how far Northern Ireland authorities are willing to go to make the team more attractive to those culturally and emotionally more inclined to look towards Lansdowne Road as opposed to Windsor Park.

For the moment, in the absence of any real prospect or desire to create a single team for the island, having two Irelands at least allows us all a team to choose to call our own, including those with the talent and dedication to make childhood dreams of playing international football for their country a reality.

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ON THIS DAY

AUGUST 31 1920

'The Very Devil'

PREACHING last night in St Patrick's Parish Church, Newtownards Road, the Rev John Redmond, Vicar of Ballymacarrett, said he was grieved beyond words for all the acts of looting and burning and other lawlessness that had taken place in the parish.

When the unspeakable murder [of DI Swanzy] was committed in Lisburn that terrible retaliation had taken place, not against the murderers, but against other people who had not committed murder and it had spread from Lisburn to Ballymacarrett and beyond.

Since these troubles began he had been in the thick of them and he had seen certain things that had impressed him. He had been a witness of boys of seven or eight years of age starting the destruction and the firing of property in Ballymacarrett. And so it seemed as if the very devil had entered into the boys of seven or eight.

Another thing that impressed him was evidence that there was some clever, wicked mind behind the burnings that were going on, in some secret or subtle way making use of the irresponsible youths to work out some nefarious, systematised plot. He saw respectable men and women, especially women, looking on at children from seven to twelve years dug up cobble-stones to provide ammunition. Time and again he had seen respectable men and women standing at their own doors and watching the burning of furniture in the middle of the street. He had no doubts that if three or four respectable men had raised determined protests, the burnings and wreckings would not have taken place.

Five shot dead in Oldpark

SCENES of a tragic nature were enacted in the early hours of yesterday morning in the Oldpark district resulting in the death of five men. The area of fighting centred around the Church of the Sacred Heart as a pitched battle erupted. At one o'clock the mobs made what was obviously a pre-concerted attack, inflamed with looted drink.

It was evident that the mob had come well prepared with firearms. The military then opened fire. Among the dead was a Mr Cassidy who had just emerged from his shop at Glenpark Street when he was shot by a sniper.

(By late August 1920 Belfast was firmly in the grip of sniper-fire and sectarian violence with the Catholic enclaves in Ballymacarrett and the Oldpark suffering mob onslaughts. Rev John Redmond, a former Great War chaplain widely praised for his peace-making efforts, suspected the violence was being orchestrated. Both the well-armed UVF – 'Carson's Army' – and a new Loyalist paramilitary force, the 'Imperial Guards', were active while the local IRA and Nationalist ex-soldiers mounted a defence.)

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