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at Sligo Rovers

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Dixie and Sligo – A Fairy Tale Almost Lost in Time

THE LEAGUE of Ireland turned 100 years old in 2021. One hundred years that have seen clubs, players, managers and football grounds come and go. For all that the beautiful game in Ireland has been ignored and neglected, even by the 'football public' for almost half of its existence now, the League and so many of its early members have prevailed. Indeed, in recent seasons, there have been signs of a revival in interest. 'Sold out' signs at Dalymount Park, big crowds at Tallaght Stadium and elsewhere.

Unfortunately, that recovery came to a dramatic halt in March 2020 as the world was hit by the COVID-19 pandemic – an outbreak that has shaped each and every one of our lives since.

The battle against the virus continues. Ireland was in the midst of a devastating 'third wave' when I began to write this book. When I'd finally dotted the

i's and crossed the t's, the Delta variant was threatening a fourth. Football here returned in August 2020 for a truncated season – but without the fans, the lifeblood of Irish clubs. Government money, the admirable efforts of supporters and owners, streaming revenue and some serious cost-cutting kept the show on the road. Finally, in the summer of 2021, the first fans were allowed to trickle back through our turnstiles. Hopes for a return to normality on the terraces and in our lives rest on the efficaciousness of vaccines.

Such a contrast to the last weekends before the pandemic struck – characterised by a buoyant feel to the beginning of the 2020 term. The sense that something was stirring was perhaps best illustrated by a pulsating encounter between champions Dundalk and their Dublin rivals Shamrock Rovers that sold out the latter's south-side venue (the first league sell-out at the Tallaght Stadium), wowed an enthralled television audience and saw a Jordan Flores strike for the Lilywhites (Dundalk Football Club, for readers outside of the Emerald Isle) go viral, drawing admiring glances and nods from across the world.

From a football perspective, the gradual return to the 'old normal' suggests that the renewed interest in Irish football was merely put on ice by the pandemic. Demand for tickets, albeit at reduced-capacity fixtures, has been strong. Naturally, there is pent-up demand for even the simplest of life's pleasures. But there is also a feeling that something has changed in how the game on this island is being perceived. Perhaps it's down to

a long-overdue realisation that it's possible to be in the thrall of the English Premier League while at the same time finding time for local fare.

For some, myself included, there has been a falling out of love with 'big club, big time' football across the water and elsewhere. The tiresome, overbearing bombast and the growing sense of alienation from a game increasingly dominated by often unsavoury, mega-rich owners have played their part. Ties have not been severed. It's never that simple. But Irish domestic football offers a welcome kitchen-sink antidote to the glamorous but tawdry soap from across the water and across the continent.

Undoubtedly, few will look back on the pandemic years with any great fondness. That said, many people will reflect on how the curtailing of so many of the daily activities we took for granted and that often cluttered our lives served to create unexpected, and not unwelcome, time for other pursuits. Projects once put on very long and often lengthening fingers came unexpectedly to see the light of day. This book is one such 'child' of the pandemic.

The inspiration has been twofold. First, the very thought of one of the game's most legendary exponents living and playing in the far west of Ireland is both beguiling and romantic.

In late January 1939, William Ralph 'Dixie' Dean, the greatest goalscorer English football had and has ever known, a genuine superstar of the game, came out of what had been a very short retirement to go and play for little Sligo Rovers – possibly the most westerly outpost of European football at the time.

Had Dean gone to a Dublin side, then maybe the move might have had more logic to it. Crossing the water to the Irish capital, just across the Irish Sea from Dean's Birkenhead home, would have made at least some sense. The trade between the two ports and the many Irish who had settled along the Mersey had bound Dublin and Liverpool together after all. And, of course, the city possessed the country's biggest and best-resourced clubs.

But the switch to a small market town on Ireland's wild Atlantic seaboard – a town with a population less than half the size of an average Everton home gate (the club with which Dean had made his name) – just catches the imagination. Sligo Rovers, the Bit O' Red as they are affectionately known, had only been founded 11 years before Dean's arrival and had only joined the League of Ireland in 1934. The club was and continues to be a co-operative venture owned by the people of Sligo and the surrounding area. And it remains the heartbeat of the town to this day. Dean's move to the club and the love affair it engendered is a story that deserves a detailed retelling. This I've sought to do.

The other reason for writing this book has been about redressing a balance. It saddens me how few stories we hear or read from the beautiful game's history here in Ireland. How few books are published on the endeavours, both domestic and European, of our football clubs. Perhaps the interest isn't there. But in a sport- and football-mad country, that is sad in itself.

One hundred years is a long time to be in operation, but the focus of the Irish football public has, for the

last five decades at least, been centred on football in England and Scotland. Unsurprisingly, the heroes of the Irish game in that time reflect that orientation. Domestic football folklore has largely been ignored or forgotten and is rarely celebrated.

Compare that to how much we hear of the greats of our 'national sports' of Gaelic football and hurling. 'Not men, but giants,' went the advertising slogan some years back. And there's no doubt that this is how many see the admittedly fine exponents of these games. But without wanting to denigrate these traditional sporting pastimes, it is fair to say that those who display their fine arts at the elite levels of Gaelic games have never had their 'greatness' eroded or undermined by unflattering or often unfair comparison with counterparts in other countries, for there are none. But for the Association footballers here, failure to have proven yourself across the Irish Sea often sees legacies, stories, talent and achievements talked down and dismissed.

So telling the tale, no, the fairy tale, of 'Dixie' Dean coming to play in Ireland is an effort to redress the balance a little. A star coming in the opposite direction in a period of the game here where the gap between football in Ireland and its bigger neighbour hadn't stretched to the yawning chasm we see today. Indeed, in the 1930s and 1940s, there was a brisk football trade between the two islands, and it wasn't always the kind of one-way traffic you might imagine.

But it's true, Dean was no longer at his very best when he arrived on these shores. The wear and tear of a 16-year-

long professional career, starting at Tranmere Rovers and startling in a golden period for Everton Football Club, had certainly taken a toll. That said, he was still only 32 when he first lined out for Sligo Rovers. And he went on to prove over his four months with the club that he was by no means a spent force who had travelled over just to pick up some handy pre-retirement money.

Whatever his intentions on moving to Yeats Country, whatever drove that decision, a bond grew between the legendary striker and the Connacht club that lasted long, long after his departure in that last summer before the outbreak of World War II. Tellingly, Dean was to look back in his memoirs on his time in Sligo as some of his happiest in the game – and he was to return as the club's guest of honour on cup final day some 30 years later in 1970. Indeed, the links between Sligo and Dean's family were once again movingly illustrated when his daughter Barbara, granddaughter Melanie and great-grandchildren Daniel and Scarlett were guests of the club as the Bit O' Red made their debut as Irish champions in the Champions League at the Showgrounds in July of 2013.

Clearly, there was a financial incentive for Dean to travel way out west. Compared with conditions today, football in the 1930s was a very different animal for players. Even the game's superstars typically had very little in their bank accounts when the time came to hang up their boots. Indeed, it's really only in the last 30 years that a top player could retire without ever having to worry about money again.

Having ended his playing days in England after the glories of Goodison Park and Everton and a brief and unhappy period with lowly Notts County, Dean moved into scouting and talent-spotting to earn a crust, acutely aware that short- and medium-term finance could prove a problem even for a footballing god. There simply was no safety net. He had a family to feed and knew just how difficult the world outside the game could be. The failure of a sports shop he had opened in his final season with Everton in 1937 had certainly made that plain. So when Sligo came calling, it was hardly surprising that when he realised his name still held currency he would attempt to capitalise on it.

And then there was the simple pull of the game, the green sward (or probably more often the brown mud and straw) and the ball. Having spent several months out of the game, in which his body had time to recover itself somewhat, perhaps he came to realise that he still had something to offer and that, well, he still just wanted to play.

That it was Sligo Rovers that benefited is befitting of the great pantomime that is football. Anything can happen, as they say, and for Rovers it did. Timing, such an important part of the game and one of Dixie's great gifts, was to prove generous to the club in creating one of the great stories of the Irish game. A tale that has been told in somewhat abridged fashion, as I found in my efforts to research it – but rarely in any sense of totality or in a way that left me satisfied. And so, in lockdown, with a little more time on my hands than I'd ever expected,

I decided to see if I could do that story (and the game on this island) just a little more justice. To see if I could bring it all to life.

* * *

In researching and writing the book, I've leaned very much on the newspaper reporting of the great centre-forward's half season with Sligo. The games, the engagements, the goals and the crowds – all seen through the eyes and told in the words of those reporters lucky enough to have seen him first-hand during that period.

Chief among them was the curiously bylined 'Volt' of the local *Sligo Champion* who recounted each and every game in his Saturday match reports and 'Soccer Causerie' column. With Sligo Rovers being primarily a 'Sunday team' (League of Ireland clubs in those days chose between Saturdays or Sundays for their home fixtures – the decisions driven by player availability and the day most suitable to the majority of their support), Volt's pieces tended to be delivered a week after each match, as the *Champion* was a weekly Saturday paper. In a way, that has proven more educational, illustrative and colourful, as the reporter had plenty of time to digest what he had seen at the Showgrounds, home of the Bit O' Red, or the other venues around the country graced by the legendary striker.

Similar pieces, often more immediate – a day after a fixture, for example – were available from the archives of the daily papers, the *Irish Independent*, the *Evening*

Herald, the *Cork Examiner*, the *Evening Echo* and the late lamented *Irish Press*. All delivered by likewise curiously named football writers ('WPM' of the *Independent*, the *Herald*'s 'NAT', 'Spectator' at the *Echo* and 'Socaro' of the *Irish Press*), and indeed presented in often familiar football parlance, showing how the game and how it is discussed by those who live for it or live off it hasn't actually changed that much in 80 years.

The pseudonyms on the football pages seem strange today in a time where football writers are often as famous as those they write about, transferring from paper to paper or website to website as the outlets battle for page views and circulation. But as writer and former sports journalist Paul Howard explained to me, back in Dean's day, it was typical for reporters to have such bylines and it was also common for those bylines to actually be more than one person!

'It was quite common in sports and social diary writing that a number of people would contribute to a particular column, and it would be published under a pseudonym, especially in horse racing. The names of individual journalists didn't really matter until about 100 years ago. If you look at papers outside of the last century, most of what was published was unbylined.' Quite a different picture today, where many football writers have supporters of their own!

Efforts to uncover who was behind these mysterious names proved largely fruitless. But perhaps that's as it should be, for if that's how they wanted it then, why should we look to unmask them now?

Whoever they were, much of this story is recounted through their words, scribbled and typed so long ago. And I owe its authenticity and much of its simple beauty to them.

Other sources include Nick Walsh's 1977 seminal biography of the player, *Dixie Dean – The Life Story of a Goalscoring Legend,* and *Dixie Uncut – The Lost Interview*, a volume based on a series of interviews with the player in the early 1970s serialised by the *Liverpool Echo* newspaper. Although between them, scarcely two pages on Dean's half season in Sligo are filled, both reference those days with a depth of feeling and genuine warmth. The value of both books for my purposes, however, lay in providing me with a greater insight into the man himself and the times in which he played.

Walsh's book is the only biography of Dixie Dean. That point alone is more than a little thought-provoking. Imagine a star of the game in more modern times producing or commissioning just the one book about his career! And imagine any player waiting the guts of 30 years after their finest moments before seeing such a tome appear on a shelf in a bookshop!

Walsh, like Dean, was a Birkenhead boy, born just eight years after his idol in 1915. This was his only-ever book – being for most of his career an executive officer in the Lord Chancellor's department in Liverpool and editor and producer of the *Court Officer*, the national journal representing the main staff association of the United Kingdom courts service. Walsh was a football enthusiast who reputedly spent a long time trying to

persuade Dean as to the merits of such a book and to gain his cooperation in the endeavour.

The book itself is a little football gem, mined from the vaults of the Limerick library where it lay untouched since 11 September 1997 until I summoned it to my Wicklow home! In a way, that long period in which it was unread only added to my interest in Dean's story. The idea that one of such greatness, who held such fame, can gradually fade from people's consciousness and interest. And perhaps even more poignant was the note on the inner sleeve about the author himself that stated in very small and unprepossessing script, 'Shortly before publication of this book, the author, Nick Walsh, died suddenly at his home in Liverpool.'

How sad. A little tragedy. Knowing how tough it is to try and write while also holding down a day job and bringing up a family – and the achievement of attracting the interest of a publisher – poor Nick Walsh never got to see his book sitting proudly on a shelf in a shop. He may never even have held a copy in his hand.

In a way, my own scribbling is a monument to both men – a humble reminder of their very existence. (And maybe mine too!) Doubtless, however, this book will go the same way. Destined to gather dust, perhaps fittingly, in a Sligo library. Maybe one day it will be searched down by myself, or one of my progenies, in JR Hartley fashion! (Look him up on YouTube if you are too young to remember the Yellow Pages phone directory television ad.) If so, then so be it. Because at least in such a reality it will have been published and have had a little life of its

own. And maybe it will have thrown a little colour into someone's life – even if it's most likely to only be my own or that of my ever-patient family and friends!

But a little colour is important. And it's important when reading this book. So as you read it, I ask that you try and see it in colour. See the bright red of the Sligo Rovers jersey, the greyish brown of the muck and mud of their Showgrounds pitch on a Sunday in late January, the ruddy faces of those in awe as a living legend takes to the field on a cold winter's day.

It's hard to do, I know. As a child, I found it hard to believe that in the classic movies of the 1940s and 1950s so beloved of my parents, people then lived and breathed in colour. The old *Pathé News* footage and the newspaper photographs of the time capture so much, yet render it somehow less real than our own experiences of the world because they are just shades of grey. But try and see it all in colour – the excited hubbub as Dixie Dean arrives at Sligo's train station, Dixie Dean emerging from the dressing rooms and running on to the football pitch at the Showgrounds, Dixie Dean playing golf at Rosses Point, Dixie Dean wowing the Mardyke, Milltown and Dalymount – because that is how it really was. And reflect on how his very presence brought colour and joy to so many in the tough times of 1930s Ireland.

Dixie Uncut – The Lost Interview is the player's life and times in his own words. Its very existence is a story in itself. In May 1971, the *Liverpool Echo* launched a serialised version of Dean's life that was originally intended to fill sports column inches over the quiet

summer weeks between football seasons but that actually ended up running for an incredible four and a half months! The paper's editor at the time, Michael Charters, spent weeks with Dixie as he relived his glory days – the results of the conversations spilling out into the *Echo* day after day, gobbled up by an eager and attentive audience.

At the end of the run, the paper's library staff asked Charters for the original manuscripts, which they filed away in the *Echo's* archive. And there they lay, largely undisturbed, for over two decades – until they were rediscovered by one of Charters's successors, Ken Rogers, while he researched a book on Everton. Realising the value of the uncut manuscript, Rogers refiled it in a locked store beneath the *Echo* building that also saved for posterity historical sports pictures and handwritten statistical books compiled by the paper's sports writers spanning a century. Rogers believed that someday Dixie Dean's story would be retold.

Another 13 years passed, until an editorial meeting at the paper in 2005 noted that it was coming up to the 25th anniversary of Dean's death – the man who gave goalkeepers nightmares having suffered a fatal heart attack just after the final whistle of a Merseyside derby at Goodison Park in March 1980. Rogers's thoughts turned to the manuscript in the newspaper's vaults, and within a few months, the 450 pages of the 18-part series were released as a book to commemorate a quarter-century since the great Everton marksman's passing.

Sligo Rovers may only get a brief mention in the *Liverpool Echo*'s interviews, but it's clear that Dean's

time playing in Ireland and the warmth with which he was received meant a lot to him. The interviews also reveal much about the life of a footballer in England in the 1920s and 1930s, when clubs ruled the roost and players, no matter how great, were largely limited to a maximum wage of £8 a week (sterling). In today's money, we'd be talking around €515 weekly for a top gun like Dixie Dean.[1] Good money, for sure. But if the market were as open and favourable for players then as it is now, the sky would have been the limit in terms of earnings for a player of his calibre.

Put it this way: if Dean had played today, he'd certainly never have needed to go to Sligo to earn a crust. He could easily have retired and lived a life of luxury, maybe played at being a pundit for a bit or just spent his time on the golf course. Or if he had wanted to play on further into his 30s, he'd have had no end of offers from around the world. Major League Soccer in Los Angeles, maybe, or even the big-money attractions of China might well have been his last port of call. The League of Ireland and Sligo Rovers wouldn't have been a consideration.

But back in 1939, Irish clubs weren't constrained by the English league's wage cap – meaning that the offer of games in Ireland had to be seriously considered. There was money to be made. That said, the decision must not have been an easy one for Dean – as it meant

1 A note on the relative worth of money in this book: I've used the Inflation Calculator for Ireland on the Central Statistics Office website to convert sums from the 1930s into current (approximate) amounts. This involves converting sums into euro amounts first, then using the calculator, which tells you how much money you would require in a later period to purchase the same volume of consumer goods and services.

leaving his wife Ethel and his three little boys (Billy, Geoff and Ralph, who were six, five and four years of age, respectively) back in Nottingham for the duration. Not a sacrifice the modern player would have to contend with – even a run-of-the-mill Premier League squad player would have the financial wherewithal these days to move his family and more or less anyone else of his choosing to the city or town where he would be plying his trade.

But to underline just how limited the options were for players in Dean's time when their playing days were over, on his return to England in the summer of 1939 after his time with Sligo and on the eve of World War II, the only job he could pick up was at the abattoir in Birkenhead, where he remained until he was enlisted in the army in 1940.

Post-war, Dean went on to run a pub in Chester, the Dublin Packet, until 1961, ultimately returning to Merseyside to work four years as a security man before his retirement in 1965. A proud, honest and grounded man, Dixie felt no sense of entitlement and never lamented his lot – for him, all work to earn a crust was worthy. Once being an internationally revered football player conferred no extra rights on him in those difficult economic days.

And yet it's still hard to imagine a giant of the game in such circumstances when you see how the giants live now. And Dixie Dean truly was a giant. A legend.

His abilities and records should not be underestimated just because he played so long ago. If he were playing now, I'm quite certain he'd be spoken of in the same breath as Cristiano Ronaldo or Lionel Messi. And just

imagine the hullabaloo if either of those two ended up togging out at the Showgrounds in Sligo for the Bit O' Red on a cold winter's Sunday! But it is that calibre of player that you should keep in the back of your mind as you read this book. Every time you see Dixie's name, think Ronaldo and hold that level of football greatness in your mind's eye. That is the reality of Dean's standing in the pantheon of football greats, and it's what gives this tale its storybook appeal.