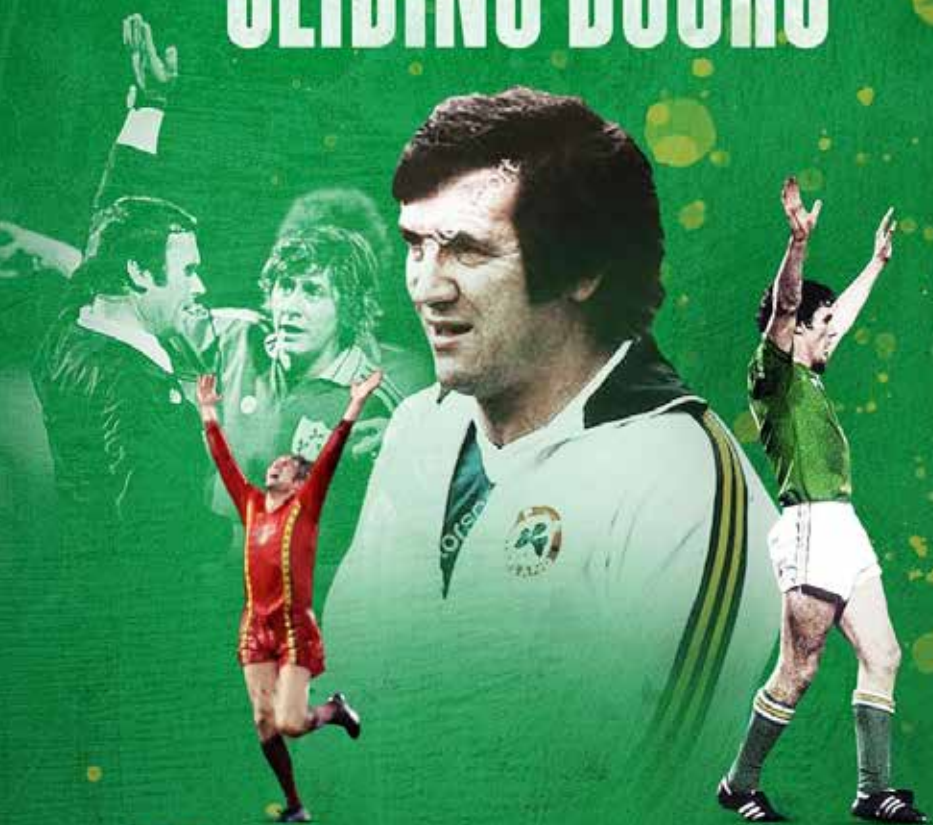


"A brilliant portrayal of a pivotal time for me and Irish football
- excellently written, accurate and engaging."

Eoin Hand

SHATTERED DREAMS, SLIDING DOORS



The Republic of Ireland's
1982 World Cup Qualifying Campaign

P A U L L I T T L E

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2.

John Giles Has Had Enough

PERSONAL REASONS are the primary factors involved in my decision to resign, John Giles tells a packed press conference convened on Tuesday, 15 April 1980 at the headquarters of the Football Association of Ireland (FAI). Those assembled are there to hear more about his surprise decision to quit as manager of the Republic of Ireland football team. Flanked by FAI president Charlie Cahill and secretary Peadar O'Driscoll, Giles tells those in attendance that he wants to spend more time with his young family. His wife and six kids. He needs to spend more time on his full-time job with Shamrock Rovers. There are just too many commitments now. John Giles has too many commitments.

He can't give the Ireland job – which has grown and changed over his six-and-a-half-year tenure – the attention it deserves. He can't give the Under-21s and youth sides, recent additions to his role, the attention they deserve. He can't give his job as manager of Shamrock Rovers the attention it deserves. He doesn't just manage Shamrock Rovers. He owns 50 per cent of the club and is also its executive director. He can't give that work the attention it deserves. He can't give his wife and kids the attention they deserve. He can't give the twins born last year the attention they deserve. So, something has to give. At 39 years old, Johnny Giles decides it'll have to be the Ireland job and, so, he is stepping away from managing the Republic of Ireland football team.

FAI president Charlie Cahill says it came as a shock. But, that said, there is no animosity. They'll part on the best of terms.

It's a personal decision of John's, says Charlie Cahill, and there's certainly no friction between him and John, between the FAI and John.

There had been friction before, of course. This wasn't the first time John Giles resigned from the Republic of Ireland job. Two years before, John Giles resigned because the FAI wouldn't let him pick his own assistants. John Giles had fought to be allowed to select his own squads and pick his own players. He was the first Ireland manager to do so. He was the first Ireland manager with a standing in the game powerful enough to make the FAI suits back down. So, he was the first Ireland manager to select his own squad and his own team. His were the first Irish teams not to be selected by the blazers and their selection committee. But for a while, John Giles wasn't going to be the first manager to handpick his own assistants and coaches, not until John Giles resigned. And then John Giles's squad of international players, his players, stepped in. They wanted him to stay. They put it up to the FAI. Giles put it up to the FAI. To the men in blazers and the committees – and they backed down. And John Giles became the Ireland manager again.

But this time, there'd be no coming back. Giles wasn't coming back. He'd gone as far as he could. John Giles had managed the Irish team through qualifying campaigns for two European Championships and a World Cup. The Republic of Ireland hadn't qualified for any of these tournaments but John Giles was still proud of what he had achieved. Proud that, under his guidance, Ireland had grown in stature as a football nation. Proud that under John Giles, the Republic of Ireland had played 37 games, won 13, drawn 11 and lost 13. We're now respected by everyone, he tells the assembled media. And we've some very good young players who can only get better.

John Giles is a serious football man. A legendary figure in the game; not just in Ireland but on a European and world stage. And he is proud that the Republic of Ireland are now also being taken seriously. Or at least more seriously. The Irish international side is competitive. There is quality. Opponents recognise it. The Republic of Ireland under John Giles may

not have qualified for a major tournament but the Republic of Ireland hadn't qualified for a major tournament under anyone. But before John Giles, few people took the Republic of Ireland seriously. Opponents might have dismissed the Irish on the pitch. But that wasn't the worst of it.

The worst of it was that the men in the blazers, the men on the committees, the men running Irish football didn't really take the senior international side seriously either. They didn't see the potential of the Irish football team, the potential of the game here. They couldn't see it because their minds were elsewhere. For many of these men, far too many of these men, running Irish football was less about improving the game and its structures than about using it as a vehicle for their own ends, their own betterment.

But John Giles is proud – and not just because in six and a half years in charge, no team has beaten his team in Ireland in a competitive fixture. John Giles is proud because he has helped shift the balance of power in the Irish set-up, helped tilt it, even if only a little, toward those who believe it can succeed. Those who know its potential. Those who believe that international football could be about more than a series of jollies for committee members and a chance to take the wife abroad.

John Giles tells the press that he's gone now, after one game of the 1982 World Cup qualifying campaign, to give his successor time to prepare for the important qualifiers later in the year. It hasn't been an easy decision and it isn't an overnight decision but it is the right decision for him.

John Giles is asked whether public and media criticism of his handling of the Irish team have played a part. He shrugs and shrugs it off. Anyone in the public eye expects that, he says. He adds, waspishly, that he's always welcomed constructive criticism. Hinting, perhaps, that not all the criticism he'd received was constructive.

John Giles is a respected and revered man in Irish football but there has, indeed, been criticism. Criticism of the style of play. Criticism of the fact that in his time in charge of the side, the Republic of Ireland have only won three times on their

travels. And a team that is weak on its travels is not likely to qualify for anything.

Con Houlihan of the *Evening Press* is one such critic. And while he's not unhappy to see John Giles leave the managerial role, he'd like to see him retained in some way within the FAI. Houlihan hadn't been a fan of how Giles's Republic of Ireland went about their business on the pitch. And Con Houlihan was particularly scathing on such matters after February's defeat at Wembley against England in a European Championship qualifier.

Houlihan is one of the most esteemed of Irish sports columnists. His pieces appear three times a week in the *Evening Press* newspaper. Con Houlihan is given almost half of the back page on such days, half of a broadsheet back page. Houlihan writes about all sports and he has free rein. His pieces are known for their wit, often apparently meandering off course, down rabbit holes and away on flights of fancy, before making points with rapier-like precision.

Con Houlihan had often voiced concern that John Giles was being paid a full-time wage for what was essentially a part-time job. The columnist was of a like mind with Giles, in fact, believing the Irish supremo had too much on his plate. Trying to grow Shamrock Rovers on and off the pitch and engaging in several other business interests while managing the international side was too much for one man. And, for Con Houlihan, the international side was suffering.

He was particularly concerned that while John Giles was based in Ireland, most of his charges and potential charges lived and played across the water.

Houlihan also decried the many members of the Irish football press who seemed in thrall of Giles. Writing in the days after the manager's resignation, Con Houlihan said he found it very sad that so many of his colleagues in the journalism profession should have put their critical faculties in cold storage in the context of Johnny Giles and his Republic of Ireland team.

The general reaction of the football press to his abdication, wrote Houlihan, was as pathetic as it was predictable. Indeed,

a few who were normally rational men, he said, had abandoned the ship of reason entirely.

The abject defeat in London that irked Con Houlihan so much had left the Republic of Ireland third in their qualification group, eight points behind England. More concerning, perhaps, were the facts that John Giles's Ireland had finished two points behind Northern Ireland and had only picked up one point on the road, away to the struggling Danes.

Houlihan was tired, not just of John Giles's managerial approach to the game but also of the relentlessly optimistic statements about progress being made when, in fact, in the last campaign, the opposite, for Con Houlihan, was clearly the case. Honest self-appraisal, he wrote, is good for us all.

According to Con Houlihan, the 2-0 defeat at Wembley was the nadir. To be Irish that night was intensely depressing, he wrote, not because the Republic of Ireland lost but because they lost so faint-heartedly. And yet, complained Con Houlihan of the *Evening Press*, the future is always bright, according to John Giles and most of the press. You may not be able to fool all the people all the time, he concluded, but possibly you can fool enough to get by.

Houlihan was critical of Giles's conservative approach, the percentage game often employed by Don Revie at Leeds, where the Irish manager had played out so many successful years. But for Con Houlihan, that approach got England under Revie nowhere and had got the Republic to much the same place.

For this revered journalist, an international game, be it a friendly or a competitive fixture, should be a showpiece. Not an exhibition of pretty football, he explained, but football infused with the philosophy of wisely organised adventure. The best way to get a result, an away draw, for example, is to play for a win, argued Con Houlihan. The percentage game is not only unattractive but it simply doesn't pay. If you must battle against opponents blessed with greater resources, then you must be bold, he contended.

Con Houlihan believed that in the aftermath of that sad occasion at Wembley – the most depressing he'd ever suffered in

sport – that John Giles knew it was all over, that his moral credit had run out. You cannot go on indefinitely playing with the faith of the public, said Houlihan. And while it was unfortunate that he came home to a bitter climate in the immediate aftermath, that bitterness did not spring from the defeat itself, which was not unexpected, but from the manner of that defeat, as John Giles and his Republic of Ireland were ultimately guilty of simply not having a go.

Eamon Dunphy, who had played with Giles at international level and worked with him at Shamrock Rovers in recent years, is pursuing a career in journalism. Over successive Sundays after John Giles's departure, Dunphy gives readers of the *Sunday Independent* the inside story on his decision to quit.

John Giles's departure reproaches us all, he writes. For the past two years, he explains, John Giles has been the most abused man in Irish sport.

Few close to Giles would disagree with his decision, says his friend and colleague. When he resigned previously, those close to him urged him to reconsider. This time, they merely nodded their heads in approval, he reports.

The decision to go may only have been announced recently – but Giles had decided well before he told his employers in Merrion Square.

To discover why the job he held for nearly seven years had become an intolerable burden, it is necessary to go back to the start of February, Eamon Dunphy informs his readers. For, over a period of about ten days at that time, all the pressures – personal and professional – that combined to make his departure inevitable were at play.

John Giles was looking after three different teams – the international side, Shamrock Rovers and the Irish youths – in three different countries – England, Ireland and France. He barely got to see his family. All three games were lost. And after the defeat at Wembley, he returned home to take his regular dose of abuse.

Eamon Dunphy tells of a well-established pattern of criticism levelled by certain members of the Irish football press at John Giles and his Republic of Ireland players – although it

was mostly aimed at Giles. Although the majority of the media pack did take each game on its merits and dispensed criticism based on an objective view of Ireland's place in the international game, there was a significant and noisy minority who were much more personal in their reproach, Eamon Dunphy explains.

For them, Dunphy writes, Giles was doing to Irish football what Richard Nixon did to US politics – he was *screwing it*.

There is no *dirty trick* to which his critics would not stoop, Dunphy tells his readers. Their *alternative analysis* of the England defeat and performance suggested, simplistically for Eamon Dunphy, that, had John Giles been more positive, the Irish team could have wiped the floor with the English.

But that was a relatively predictable and mild line of criticism, he believes. There has also been, writes Eamon Dunphy, a nasty strain of personal abuse in what was written about Giles in certain quarters. The aim was to undermine his integrity, undermine his work in Irish soccer. Ugly, gutter journalism, Eamon Dunphy calls it, and all the more disturbing because it seemed to be effective.

By way of example, a disbelieving Dunphy used the booing of John Giles's name by a section of the Lansdowne Road crowd when it was read out over the public address at matches in the last year. Booing that Giles's young sons, sat beside Dunphy, had to endure.

What part of the Irish psyche this reflected, Eamon Dunphy dreaded to think. Ultimately, to witness a great athlete, a man of immense natural dignity treated like that was, for this budding football journalist, nothing short of disgusting.

Eamon Dunphy was at pains to underline the progress made under John Giles's direction. The departing manager had built on the advancements of predecessors Mick Meagan and Liam Tuohy, imposing for the first time the discipline and organisation required of any international team. The flippant and almost apologetic approach to international football had ended under John Giles. For far too long it had been a shambles, a joke.

But crucially and most tangibly, John Giles's team had got results. The players had responded to his guiding hand, his

standing in the game. Eamon Dunphy writes that John Giles's tenure was a draught of professional air all the more welcome and stimulating coming from a man respected and revered by all the players and the game in general.

Playing for Ireland, for those who took their football seriously, was no longer to be avoided. Indeed, John Giles had made it professionally respectable. Succumbing to pressure from clubs across the water not to travel – as the likes of Giles, Tony Dunne, Shay Brennan and Noel Cantwell had often done in the dark ages – had become less palatable, explains Dunphy. And this is why, he writes, players like Liam Brady, David O'Leary, Frank Stapleton and Mark Lawrenson go out of their way to play for their country.

Dunphy believes results improved dramatically during the John Giles reign. For him, the Republic of Ireland were now formidable opponents in the international game.

Eamon Dunphy admits, however, that the question of John Giles's style of football with the Republic of Ireland is a prickly one. The former Leeds midfielder's belief that possession should be retained, that the team that has the ball controls the game, was quite radical in an Irish context. Indeed, it is alien, says Eamon Dunphy, to our Celtic nature and our traditional way of playing. However, that the Giles approach was too conservative is incorrect in Eamon Dunphy's mind. Although this may all be in the eye of the beholder. But criticism of style is more acceptable than criticism of person, he insists. After all, writes Dunphy, the cut and thrust of argument is what sport is all about and whether route one or route four is the best route to goal is a legitimate topic for debate.

All that said, Eamon Dunphy insists that, ultimately, when assessing the outgoing manager's legacy, the question of style is beside the point. What's most important is that John Giles is leaving the Irish international team in much better shape than he found it. The side is being taken seriously in the FAI. The side is now taken seriously by opponents. And, crucially, the introduction to international football for players coming through the youth system like Ronnie Whelan, Gary Waddock

and Kevin O'Callaghan has been educational and professional and vastly different to the shambles Eamon Dunphy experienced when he came into the international reckoning in 1965.

Writing in the week after Eamon Dunphy's *Sunday Independent* piece, Con Houlihan disagrees about John Giles's tenure as Ireland manager. And he disagrees with Eamon Dunphy about John Giles's treatment in the Irish media. And Con Houlihan hopes that Eamon Dunphy keeps a copy of his *Sunday Independent* article so that he may review it in a few years' time and know what it is to break out in a cold sweat!

Con Houlihan likes Eamon Dunphy and he hopes his ambition to be a full-time journalist is realised. But Con Houlihan thinks that Eamon Dunphy will need to be careful or he'll end up with the Catholic Truth Society writing pamphlets about the lives of the saints!

In his column, Con Houlihan takes umbrage at Eamon Dunphy's 'gutter press' jibe for those in the Irish football press pack who were less than effusive in their praise for Giles. Con Houlihan suggests Eamon Dunphy should read the English and Italian football press to educate himself on how mild the climate in Ireland is.

For Con Houlihan, it's ridiculous to contend that John Giles has been the most abused man in Irish sport. The truth being nearer the opposite, he says.

For Con Houlihan, John Giles was on borrowed time. John Giles's race was run. The hope and light of the early years, the crushing of the Soviet Union at Dalymount in 1974 and the thrilling defeat of the French at Lansdowne Road in 1977 had long faded. More and more, argues Con Houlihan, fear of defeat had come to dominate both John Giles's thinking and that of his team, as illustrated so painfully with their feeble Wembley showing.

* * *

John Giles doesn't go after the Republic of Ireland's sorry defeat to England in February as Con Houlihan may have liked. In fact, John Giles leads the Republic of Ireland into the World

Cup qualifying campaign for Spain 82. But then he goes after the first game.

The draw for the qualifiers is less than kind to the Republic of Ireland. The balls in the UEFA group pots cared little for Irish dreams of qualifying for a first major tournament and joining its firmament of stars.

The Republic of Ireland are grouped with three heavyweights of the European game. First, there is Belgium, obdurate, tough, disciplined and talented. The Belgians have qualified for the 1980 European Championships in the summer in Italy. Only eight teams qualify. The best eight teams in Europe and the Belgians are amongst them. A squad of serious quality, a squad boasting Eric Gerets, Jan Ceulemans, Jean-Marie Pfaff, Rene Vandereycken and François Van der Elst under the wily, experienced Guy Thys.

And then there are the Dutch, who will also play in the European Championships in Italy in June. The Dutch have featured in the last two World Cup Finals. The Dutch are heading into a transitional period but they are still good enough to be among the top eight sides in Europe.

But that is not all. Fortune must not consider Ireland to be brave. Because if fortune did so, then fortune wouldn't have added France to the Republic of Ireland's qualification group. France aren't going to the European Championships in Italy. They missed out on qualification by a point to reigning champions Czechoslovakia. But everyone knows the flamboyant French are the coming team of European football. Michel Hidalgo's team has Michel Platini. It has Jean Tigana. It has Larios, Bossis, Rocheteau and Lacombe. It has class all over the park, all over the bench.

But first, on Wednesday, 26 March 1980, there is Cyprus. John Giles's last game in charge of the Republic of Ireland will be in Nicosia against the Mediterranean minnows. John Giles knows this is the end, even if no one else knows. Perhaps the daunting make-up of UEFA World Cup qualification Group Two has played a part in his decision. Indeed, it's a group that would give any football manager pause for thought.