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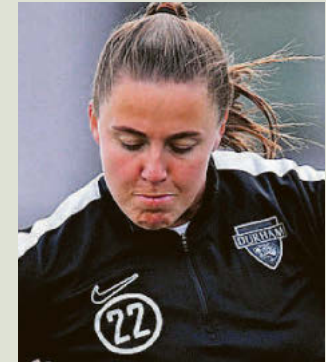
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BOYLE SPORTS



EL OF AN EFFORT!

ELEANOR RYAN-DOYLE went to England to follow her dreams. Most Irish footballers do. Yet when reality collides with those fantasies, something has to give. She came through the ranks at Peamount, playing her first game as an eight-year-old, joining the senior squad at 15, before the lure of full-time football took her to Birmingham, then Coventry, finally Durham. Now she is back where she started - except the old normal no longer exists. While her mum is still in charge of the kit for Peas' first team and her dad and brother still work around the club, the team Ryan-Doyle has rejoined is not the one she left. At 27, she was the oldest player on the starting XI last week, a freakish turn of events for someone so used to being considered the up-and-comer. Despite her shock at her new-found status, she is very happy. Ryan-Doyle (above) says: "I hadn't really played football for a while. "I'd been part of teams but I hadn't got regular football. So I needed the time to enjoy football again, to get back playing and be happy again with football. "I'd never take it back. The experiences I had going to England, the players I played against, was unbelievable. But the game there is cutthroat. "If you are not in the team that is fine if you're from England and you can go back to your family. But it's tough when you're not from there and you have to just go home and not really see anyone." Peamount have won just four league matches this year so the Cup offers respite - as well as hope. The trouble is they host high-flying Athlone in the quarter-finals today (5pm). "They are at their peak right now," said Ryan-Doyle. "We have players who have good talent but just need the experience. I think Peamount will grow in the next couple of years."

I DON'T FEEL PUNISHED..IT WAS JUST BAD LUCK!

ALL YOU NEED IS LOVE
Hawkins was relieved to have positive news to take to sons Eoin and Will

“The thing you learn with having cancer is that you just never know when your time is up”



HIS day began in a waiting room, a real-life purgatory. The clock ticked past nine when he took his seat. He recalls the noise of the water cooler; the rise and fall in volume as people passed along the corridor. Otherwise there was silence, which is not an uncommon thing on the seventh floor of the Mater Hospital, where cancer patients get their treatment. And on this sunny Friday morning, this was where Colin Hawkins, one of only 20 Irish footballers to win a medal at an official World Cup event, went to discover if the cancer drug they'd given him would save his life. The clock ticked on. It was just after 10am when he left his chair to take in the view from the seventh floor window; Croke Park to the right, Dalymount Park to the left. It was Dayler where Hawkins played when he was 25 and considered the best defender in the League of Ireland. "You felt invincible," he says of his days as a professional footballer. But no one ever is. Now, as a 47-year-old man, his feelings of invincibility are over. He is one of 10 children, the only one to become a professional athlete, a four-times winner of the League of Ireland, later a player with Coventry City. "I probably took my health for granted," he says. "Put it this way, it was a big shock to my nine siblings that I was the one who got so ill. 'It can't be you, you are the sports guy', they said." But it was him because cancer is a democratic illness. Anyone can be diagnosed with it. "It is two-and-a-half years since I was first diagnosed," Hawkins says. "And the thing you learn about this life is that you don't know when your time is up." "I don't feel punished or whatever. It is just unlucky. Still, if you ever want a



SAINTS ALIVE Colin Hawkins, right with Ian Gilzean and Trevor Molloy and below, Hawkins at Sporting Fingal

wake-up call about why you should enjoy every day of your life, go into the Mater every Friday. "Walk to the seventh floor. Go into the waiting room where you receive your treatment. You are handed a number. A person sits to your left, another to your right. "I keep asking, 'how is this place so busy? Are more and more people getting cancer than ever before?' Their answer is actually reaffirming. 'No,' they tell me, 'more and more people are surviving.' By now it was 11am. He still had the ticket in his hand. It resembled a small raffle ticket, a beige colour. He waited and thought back to 2023 when he started to feel unwell. By the time he discovered he had cancer in his blood, the pain became unbearable. He subsequently needed surgery on his neck and his back. "When the myeloma is alive and active, that is when your bones break," he says matter of factly. "When it is gone and under control, all that pain is gone." Good news came. He received stem cell treatment and entered remission. Then terrible news followed. His wife Elaine was diagnosed with breast cancer. Telling their three children this news was the hardest day of their lives. Better days came after that. Elaine's treatment worked. She, thankfully, is in remission. Life returned to normal for a while until his old pains resurfaced. He visited Dr O'Gorman in the Mater to review a new drug he had been on for six weeks. Your numbers have gone through the roof and your myeloma has gone crazy again," he was told. "We need to take you off this drug and get you on a new one." That was three months ago. He had to check into the hospital that night and ended up staying for a month to see if he could deal with the side-effects of the drug. He got pancreatitis. There is pain and then there is pain. Pancreatitis was hell. But this feeling he had on that Friday morning was way worse, sitting on a blue chair, holding a beige ticket, staring at the clock, waiting and wondering. If the news was good, if he was told the drug was working, then life would go on. He'd return to work 'to CPM, the best employers in the world who have looked after me while I have been ill'. But if this drug wasn't working, what then? "Sitting in that room, waiting for that news was the first time I was seriously worried. Three treatments had failed. "I had my bloods taken the day before. I had scans. As the clock ticked towards noon. I was waiting to be told if my numbers had improved or got worse. "I have always fought it (his cancer) head on. This was the first time when I realised this was a trial drug; so if this doesn't work then what the hell is the next treatment?" The stem cell transplant he had

received was supposed to give him 10 years in remission. "For the cancer to come back after 18 months was kind of unheard of for my age. I was obviously nervous waiting for a result!" He remembers the first time he issued those words, in 1998. He was a St Pat's player then. They won the title on the last day of the season, beating Kilkenny City away. But to become champions, they needed Dundalk to defeat Shels. So they waited for a result from Oriel Park. They got the news they wanted. The following year something similar happened, Pat's beating Bray on the final day of the season to win back-to-back titles. Consumed by the game, he worked to make the most of what he had, reaching an incredibly high level, representing his country at underage level, winning bronze at the 1997 Under-20 World Cup. And when he spent a month in the Mater Hospital over Easter, all those players from all those teams came in to visit. Brian Kerr, his Ireland manager in 1997, checks in at least once a week. "Brian has been incredible," Hawkins says. "He has such a big heart. Football people, they're great. They don't forget. They remember the big nights, you being there for them on the pitch. This time they were there for me. All these years later and the dressing room spirit is still strong. It's why football is special." Yet now all those characteristics which made him such a winner were being put to the test. He says: "My life is on hold. Thursday I get the bloods done, Friday my treatment. It has been a kick in the balls. That is where my life is at the moment. "I am not working because I don't have the energy. My immune system is really low. I kind of feel I have a permanent flu or a chest infection." Yet he isn't feeling sorry for himself because he has spoken to people in the chair next to him in that waiting room, swiftly realising if they have no hope. And on this Friday morning three and a half hours elapsed before Dr O'Gorman called. And that was when the man who played in a World Cup Under-20 semi-final walked into a doctor's office. In those steps, the fact he had been a champion footballer on four different occasions ceased to matter. He was just another number, waiting to hear if his cancer drug was helping. "It is," said Professor O'Gorman. "You are responding well." That was eight weeks ago. Today Hawkins is in remission. This champion football player has just won the biggest prize of his life.