

Moment frozen in time

Fifty years on Antonin Panenka's audacious penalty kick is recalled and repeated across the world



Aidan Fitzmaurice

In the few seconds it takes to park his car — it's not a designated parking spot but as a national icon, he parks where he wants — and walk to meet his guest from Ireland, the 77-year-old is stopped for a selfie by a woman in her 20s. She's young enough to be his granddaughter, but she is well aware of who he is. There's not just one halo of fame over the head of Antonin Panenka, but two. Here in Prague, he's on home ground, literally, as we meet at the stadium of Bohemians, the club he served as a player and where he still has a background role.

But, of course, he's also one of the heroes who led the national team (then Czechoslovakia) to a European Championship title in 1976, beating then world champions West Germany in the final in Belgrade. Just as Ireland legends still dine out on the achievements of Italia '90, so do those Czechs and Slovaks feed off their mighty triumph in '76, with many events planned this year to mark the 50th anniversary. But internationally, he is better known for 'the Panenka' — the unique penalty he scored past Sepp Maier to win the Euros in a shootout. Instead of blasting it low or high to a corner, he deftly chipped it, straight and low, to leave Maier grasping at air. In time, the Panenka was added to the lexicon of the game. Over the course of a long chat, conducted on a sunny Prague day in the press room of Bohemians' old stadium and conducted in Czech with the translation skills of Petr, his unofficial agent and life-long friend, Panenka addressed the state of the game today, life under communist rule, fame and finances. And with a view to the Czechia-Ireland World Cup play-off, he's in a position to zoom in on Ireland's leading man, Troy Parrott, and offer advice on why the Dubliner missed a Panenka while on club duty. Yet fame is double-edged. I ask if it can be a frustration that he achieved a lot in his life and career, won the

Euros with his national team, landed five medals in five seasons in Austrian football with Rapid Vienna, lived a good life ... but is still only really known outside of his homeland for one moment that took a matter of seconds?

"No doubt it's the penalty that made me famous in the football world and I am really grateful for that, that it happened," he says. "On the other hand, I always tried to do something for the fans, not just in that one moment in Belgrade but in every game, and it makes me a bit sad that everything is overshadowed by one penalty. But I am still glad it happened."

In essence, Czechs know him as a member of that great side of '76. But beyond those borders — as in Spain, where there's a popular football magazine named after him — it's the penalty.

"There is a Euros every four years so they don't always stay in the memory of people. But my penalty was a real shock, not only for our own fans but across the world. So maybe the penalty stays in the public memory more than our gold medals. What helps me now, even after 50 years, is that there are famous football players who emulate, or who try to emulate, my penalty. "Of course I am very proud of it when I see it tried now, when I hear the name. It is 50 years now but it's still with us. I know there are generations of football players and fans whomaynot know me or who I am, but they know the name Panenka. I am especially proud to hear it used in English and Spanish, that makes me really proud."

The penalty almost did not happen because



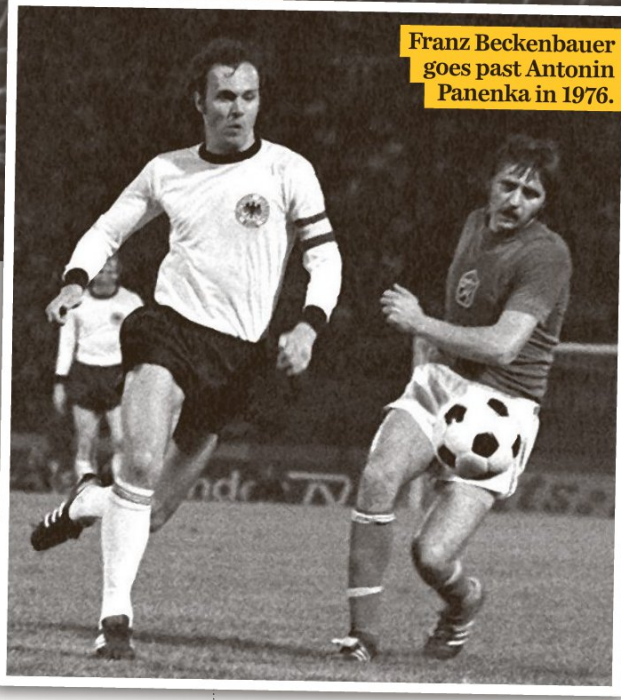
his roommate warned him not to try such an audacious move on such a big stage. He revisits that later in the conversation, but is it a cause for regret that finance did not follow fame?

In an era when players try to monetise their careers with a trademark of their jersey number (CR7) or even a goal celebration (Cole Palmer), the creation of a Panenka moment today would no doubt make a fortune for its instigator. All Panenka got was, like the rest of his teammates in Belgrade that day, the price of a colour television.

"It could have made a lot of money for me if it had been patented. Some time after Belgrade, I met a friend who worked for the patent office. I jokingly asked him what about having a patent for the Panenka penalty. He said it was impossible, it was not a material thing. At that time we had a communist government in Czechoslovakia so it was not possible, and it's too late now. "Yes, I could be a millionaire but I doubt I'd be sitting here today talking to

you if I was a millionaire," he grins. "It would be enough for me if the famous players who use my penalty say thanks every now and again. I can live without royalties. "I got no special payment for the winning penalty. The bonus for winning the Euros was around 16,000 Czech crowns, around 800 German marks: maybe US\$600 at the time. Enough to buy a colour TV, but not much more. We heard the Germans had been promised 35,000 marks if they beat us. So yes, the Euros bonus was enough to get a TV set, but nothing extra for the penalty and that's fine with me."

Tell him I admire his ability to park the 'what ifs' and wonder about the money he could have made. "I have also had these ideas and thoughts as you did," he replies. "We had a communist system so we didn't think about money or rewards, maybe later when I played in Austria it came into my mind. "My reward from my penalty is that it's still well known in every country in the world. In Spain people remember me. We go to Spain



Franz Beckenbauer goes past Antonin Panenka in 1976.

a lot for events and it's a reward for me to get acclaim there. That is my payment."

To tell the story of the Panenka we need to go back to its origin, a notion which arose from training-ground rivalry among the Bohemians players. "At training sessions I usually stayed back after the other players. We had a competition where I'd take bets against our goalkeeper, Zdenek Hruska. "We'd practise free kicks, penalties and we would have a competition between the two of us, usually for chocolate or for a beer," Panenka says now. "Before I tried what would become the Panenka, he [goalkeeper] was more successful than me. So I gave it a lot of thought, what I could do to win our bets? Before falling asleep at night I desperately wanted to come

up with something that could beat our goalie.

"So I got this idea that I might try this light chip, not to kick the ball too hard but a chip. I knew that the 'keeper always went to one of the sides so I decided to take it not too strong, if you have a 'keeper with long legs he still might make contact and I wouldn't score. So that's where it started.

"Then, in training, I started to win the bets. That was good for me on one level but bad on another as I was getting too much chocolate and beer. I was getting fat. Then I decided to try it in a friendly game with Bohemians and I was always successful. After a year I used it for the first time in a league game and I'd been using it for two years before Belgrade. I can't remember where the first one in the league was, but I know that three weeks before I used it in Belgrade, I tried it against our national team 'keeper Ivo Viktor in the Dukla Prague-Bohemians derby. He knew about the penalty, but I was still successful. "I based my penalty on quite a long run-up to the ball as that gave me time to see what the goalie's reaction would be. What was possible with my body and run-up and my eyes was to convince the goalkeeper that I would send the ball into the corner. "It was all in the eyes. My run-up was quite aggressive, I tried to convince the goalie that it would be

a strong kick, so it was about getting the 'keeper to think what I wanted him to think."

And then, on to the Euros in Yugoslavia. Panenka says he'd decided, after they beat the Netherlands in the semis that if the final went to a shootout, he would try his luck. "For me there was no risk. I knew not just 100 per cent, but 1,000 per cent that I would be successful if the moment came and I was selected to take a penalty. No one really knew about this penalty of mine, only people in Czechoslovakia. The Germans didn't have eyes on the penalties I had been using in the domestic league and I knew I would score.

"I also thought that when the atmosphere is like that, people are nervous, with so much at stake. It's all extreme feelings on the field that played into my hands as I liked the pressure."

Of course it was a success, but for every winner there's a loser and German 'keeper Sepp Maier was on the other side. "I'm accused of making a clown of Sepp but I never planned to ridicule him. This sort of penalty was just for me to score, not to humiliate a great opponent, that's the opinion of foreign journalists who accuse me of making a clown out of Maier. He didn't talk to me for five years, though."

If one of Panenka's international teammates had his way, the kick would never have happened at all. "The whole team and staff knew

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Photo: Karl Schnorrer



Antonin Panenka: 'There are generations who may not know me or who I am, but they know the name Panenka.'

about my intention to take a penalty like that if we had a shootout. Only one person protested, our goalkeeper, Ivo Viktor, he didn't like my plan. He was my roommate in Belgrade, he said after we beat the Netherlands in the semi-final, 'no way are you allowed to do that in the final. If you do it, I will not let you back into the room after the game,' says Panenka. "I don't think it was personal sympathy for Maier as a fellow goalkeeper, it was the risk if it going wrong. "He only let me in at 6.30am the next day, he was still angry with me. I knocked on the door, but he wouldn't let me in. Now, I know he wasn't really angry with me, but he said he had to keep his word and not let me into the room.

"I didn't want to go to bed anyway, we were champions of Europe. We stayed up until all hours, I had some friends who had emigrated from Prague to Belgrade so we met in the hotel and I stayed up in the bar with them. It was the first time and the last time in my life I had Champagne and caviar for breakfast."

The classy Czech team at Euro '96 came close, but Belgrade in '76 was the peak for a nation that no longer exists. Czech football has been struggling of late, no World Cup since 2006 and a shocking loss to the Faroes in the last qualifiers, so their date with Ireland in Prague is huge. Panenka did play for Czechoslovakia against Ireland in Prague, a 4-1 friendly win in 1979, but he has no strong memory of that. "I know how important the game is for both sides, it will be a tough game. Being at home is a big advantage to us as I think Dublin would be more scary. I don't expect many goals, maybe 1-1 and penalties. Fingers crossed for us. "The current Czech team are in

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good shape, but still our players no longer play with the best clubs abroad in western Europe and I don't think they can play beyond their capacity. I expect more of a big fight than beautiful football against Ireland."

He is aware of Troy Parrott, so I show him the Dubliner's failed Panenka penalty for AZ against FC Twente earlier this season, when the ball went over the bar. Where did Parrott go wrong? "You have to practise a lot and give it time. If you just walk up to the ball and try it, it's all wrong. I don't think Parrott was fully concentrated and he should have just chipped the ball, not given it so much power; otherwise it would have been a goal as the 'keeper went to the side."

Parrott was unsuccessful but the man who invented the Panenka only recalls one occasion when he missed. "I used it after the Belgrade final. I used it against France in qualifiers, I used it a few times for Rapid Vienna in European competition, and I think I repeated it maybe 25 times and missed only one. "That was a pre-season game in the Czechoslovak league in some small village. There was a pool of water in front of the 'keeper, he got stuck in the puddle and didn't move so he made the save, that was the only time I didn't score from a penalty. One miss in my career."

Like many ex-pros in their 70s, Panenka has fonder memories of football 'back then' compared to the straitjacketed, setpiece driven game we see today. "I can't see a player of the type I was in the Czech squad now, but it's not just our problem, today's football has too much stress placed on the physical abilities and aggression of players. In my time every league

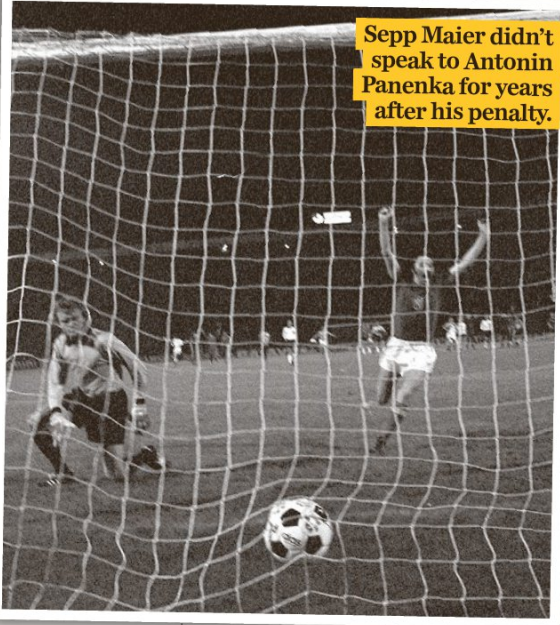
club in Czechoslovakia had three or four players who played in a style like mine. It's hard to play like I did in today's football.

"Today's football doesn't give me the joy I had in my time when I played. Teams today have a strong tactical approach but don't play creative football and it lacks the joy it had before. Football evolved into something else. It's fast and aggressive, so players don't have time to create, to show tricks."

Five decades later, the Panenka name is as powerful as ever. And it was to have an unexpected benefit for our visit. As we chat while walking across the pitch to take some photos, he asks who else I am meeting during my few days in Prague. I mention that, despite getting a phone number for more modern Czech legends Karel Poborsky and Vladimir Smicer, they had not replied to requests for an interview. Panenka shakes his head.

"That's not right, I played golf with Vladi only yesterday, you came a long way and he didn't answer you. I will call him and tell him to speak to you," he says. True to his word, within two hours an invite arrives to meet the elusive Smicer in a cafe the next morning.

He begins with an apology for his non-reply, explaining he was very busy with his business interests all week and couldn't commit to a meeting. "But when Antonin Panenka called me and said I had



Sepp Maier didn't speak to Antonin Panenka for years after his penalty.

to meet this guy from an Irish paper, I could not say no to Antonin Panenka."

The March sun is still strong as we wrap up. Panenka has been generous with his time and deeply appreciative of the bottle of Irish whiskey offered as a thank you. At the start of this process, we had been warned that Panenka tended to demand a fee for interviews with foreign media, but no money changes hands. His translator/agent/friend is similarly generous with his time. As a parting thought, he goes back to Belgrade in 1976 when his team became kings of Europe and he carved a place for himself in football history. "We didn't have much success in Czechoslovak or Czech football so it's in the memory of football fans here, what we did as a team in Belgrade in 1976. I am happy that what I did is still remembered and that it hasn't just disappeared into the files of history, that it's a living thing. That's good enough for me."