

Comment

Karen Duggan



Ireland need to learn the right things from their sobering French lesson

After an agonising wait for the Irish girls, their mental fatigue showed against France on Thursday night. This was caused by external and internal forces.

Firstly, the World Cup squad selection left its mark after what felt like months of debate. Secondly, the FAI should have dealt with Vera Pauw's NWSL ban last December.

An investigation is needed into how the association dealt with the Pauw allegations. Just not now. Not 12 days out

from 80,000 fans packing Stadium Australia for what promises to be a monumental occasion. For most of us, it is the biggest sporting event in our lifetime.

The Ireland men's first World Cup match was against England in Cagliari 33 years ago. I wasn't born, but I heard about it. We all did. Those legendary players were allowed to enjoy the build-up to Italia 90 as the Irish public embraced them, in what sounded like the wildest party the country has ever known.

Recent events have sullied a similar

experience for Katie McCabe's team. Most of this is out of the players' control. McCabe tried to put it to bed at Wednesday's press conference. You could hear how frustrated she was to have to publicly support her manager. She cannot be expected to address a situation dating back to 2018. In the US.

It demands a careful, independent review. But this not the time.

The girls had just begun to heal from the squad announcement. It almost felt like those selected were afraid to be too happy. Leanne Kiernan's exclusion struck a chord in camp, especially among her closest friends. Some players were distraught. I've expressed my disappointment with that decision.

Revamped attack

The other stuff is toxic enough to ruin our first World Cup. Strong leadership is needed now. Less "I", more "we", as Pauw herself noted. Isn't it insane that this needs to be said out loud 12 days before Ireland kick off in the World Cup?

This column should be homing in on glaring problems. On the pitch, not off it. France pulled us apart far too easily in the second half. It provides a blueprint for Australia and Canada.

There is plenty of work to be done. A little too much for my liking. This is not the Ireland team that qualified for the World Cup. For better or worse, changes to personnel and the system have been made.

The group still needs to gel. They said it themselves. The attack has been

completely revamped with three American-born girls – Kyra Carusa, Sinead Farrelly and Marissa Sheva – suddenly becoming established starters.

Carusa deserves this opportunity. She holds the play up better than anyone else, although I think Kiernan would have shot first time after that early error by France goalkeeper Pauline Peyraud-Magnin on Thursday.

The shape of the team was encouraging for 44 minutes, but Sheva's passing range is a concern and Farrelly – described by Pauw as the "player we have been waiting for" – almost blew a gasket.

From where I watched the match, the 33-year-old went to ground to avoid injury. She rarely wastes possession, but 70 minutes looks like her limit. Ruesha Littlejohn can bring renewed energy for the last quarter.

Aoife Mannion's injury means that Megan Connolly has returned to centre half. Megan is a robust midfielder, the perfect foil for Denise O'Sullivan and a set-piece specialist. The Matildas will try to replicate how Kadidiatou Diani isolated her and almost drew a penalty from the English referee.

Concentration levels

Diane Caldwell has been playing for Ireland since 2006. She is on the plane to Brisbane. I'd trust her to start so Connolly can return to midfield. Personnel is vital but, at this level, so too is balance within the team.

We learned enough lessons on Thursday to last a lifetime.

“This column should be homing in on glaring problems. On the pitch, not off it. France pulled us apart far too easily in the second half. There is plenty of work to be done. A little too much for my liking

Kenza Dali lit up the Women's Super League this year. She created all three goals in Tallaght. A perfectly weighted ball over the top for the first, brilliant movement to shake off Sheva and nutmeg Louise Quinn for the second before a pinpoint corner for the third. Izzy Atkinson will learn so much by rewatching the first and third goal. Fundamental stuff but about concentration levels too.

Littlejohn spent the season with Dali at Aston Villa, so none of this should have come as a surprise. This is the calibre of creative player Ireland must contain at the World Cup. I'd have kicked her early and often. At least until I saw yellow.

Ireland need to remind people how they qualified. No friendly was ever treated like a friendly when I wore the shirt. We always had something to prove.

There should be a nasty streak in every Irish player. Not dirty. Not going out to injure. Nothing like that. But the sort of grit that McCabe and O'Sullivan bring to tackles every single day.

We didn't lay a glove on the French after the first goal. That's unacceptable. Denise put herself about and you could see her blood was boiling.

Aerial weapon

We must be more aggressive at the World Cup. Because the next opponent knows how to crack Pauw's system: a high press, turn our wingbacks into fullbacks, and break the connect between Carusa and midfield.

We remain a set-piece football nation. That's our best chance of scoring, unless McCabe can get her head up and shoot. But that's impossible if she is stuck in Ireland's half. Quinn will be crowded out in the opposition's box so let's make her the ultimate decoy. Caldwell is an aerial weapon. So is Carusa.

That's what the next 10 days of training should look like. Set-piece after set-piece until the girls are too exhausted to care about external noise.

Thursday was a reality check. We've done something incredible by reaching this World Cup. Everything else is a bonus, but this special group of girls have captured the nation's interest. Imagine what could happen next.

Soccer Olivia O'Toole interview

‘I’m going to be uncontrollable at the national anthem. I’ll be crying, sobbing’



Gordon Manning

Ireland's second-highest international goalscorer, behind only Robbie Keane, is awaiting the World Cup with bated breath

The sports hall in Darndale/Belcamp Recreation Centre is alive with activity. As footballs smack off walls, Olivia O'Toole is sitting in a small side room talking addiction. She was only a kid when the fork appeared in her road. She chose football. That became her drug, and saved her life.

With 54 goals, O'Toole is second on the list of all-time Ireland scorers, behind only Robbie Keane. She is one of Ireland's greatest footballers, but in terms of pioneers for the women's game here, O'Toole is unconquered.

Yet all this recognition, this adulation, has come long after the event. Her Ireland career spanned 1991 to 2009, generating more than 100 caps, but few cared when she was out there doing it. She captained her country in a void.

Shopkeepers on Sheriff Street in Dublin city centre remember O'Toole arriving with rolls of posters jammed under her exters. "I'd go around and ask for them to be put up in their shops for our games, club and country. The only people going to our matches then were families and friends. We had to do our own publicity," she recalls.

O'Toole was, and still is, a force of nature. Small but mighty. But then, she had to be. When you lived cheek by jowl there wasn't much you could hide, so when drugs ravaged the area, the community rallied together. The world keeps spinning; the folk of Sheriff Street know that more than most.

"You grew up young," says O'Toole, who is the second eldest of nine. "People had nothing, but you helped each other out. You were able to go next door and ask, 'Have you got a bit of sugar until tomorrow? Or a sup of milk?' There was genuine camaraderie. Great people."

Her name and her talents quickly spread beyond the flats, but you don't get bigger than Sheriff Street; you aren't allowed get too big for whatever boots you are wearing. The streets won't let that happen.

But the place that made her could also have broken her. She knows that. O'Toole still sees that reality most days in the haunted, sunken faces of old friends.

Street footballer

Heroin didn't so much arrive to the area in the 1980s as take ownership of it. She saw good people succumb to addiction – solid, decent families. And it wasn't long before it reached inside the O'Toole family's front door.

"When I was around 13, my sister would have been 16 or 17, and I could see her disintegrating before my eyes because of drugs," recalls O'Toole.

"I could have gone down that road, but thankfully I didn't. I always say, it's left or right, you pick the right path or the wrong one. If I'd picked the wrong path, I wouldn't be speaking to you today. Many of my friends who went the other way are dead now."

"By the time I was 15, two of my brothers and two of my sisters were on it. They're all better now, thankfully."

But O'Toole recently met an old friend,



■ Clockwise from top: Olivia O'Toole today, at the Darndale/Belcamp Recreation Centre; celebrating her 50th goal for Ireland, against Italy in May 2007; and rejoicing in World Cup qualification with Diane Caldwell and Louise Quinn at Hampden Park last October. PHOTOGRAPHS: NICK BRADSHAW; LORRAINE O'SULLIVAN/INPHO; RYAN BYRNE/INPHO



“It makes me sad and angry when I see signs in estates: ‘No ball games allowed.’ You are not allowed play in your cul-de-sac because it’s too noisy. We grew up in flats where you could hear every bounce off every wall

in 10. She's five years in Darndale. The kids would buy and sell you, but she knows those kids, she was that kid. The hall is used for school PE classes during the day and afterwards for everything from football to basketball, table tennis to chess.

"You hear something and see something different every day," she continues. "My job is a pleasure, I actually love working in it."

But she will be taking a break from work soon when she flies out to Australia for the World Cup. She'll be there for all three of Ireland's group games, and longer if they progress.

"I'm going to be uncontrollable at the national anthem. I'll be crying, sobbing, I know it," she says.

"Even when I watch the girls on the telly, I'd be sitting with the family and as soon as the anthem comes on, I'm up on my feet singing my brains out."

"That first game in particular, I'll be an emotional wreck. Did you ever think in your lifetime Ireland's women would get to a World Cup? I'm going to relish every single bit of it."

Glass ceiling

She's still living in Sheriff Street, a corner kick from the home place. "Ma is still there," she says.

None of her siblings are far away either. Her sister Julie had a widely acclaimed book called Heroin published in 2011, chronicling her battles with drugs, being homeless and ultimately overcoming addiction.

"She was a good footballer," says O'Toole. "If she stuck at it she probably would have had a career, but drugs took over."

When she travels through Dublin these days, it's not necessarily the noise that strikes O'Toole, but the silence. It's hard to find kids playing football on the streets. Play has become a structured activity.

"It makes me sad and angry when you see signs in estates: 'No ball games allowed'," she says. "You are not allowed play in your cul-de-sac because it's too noisy. We grew up in flats where you could hear every bounce off every wall. Now a kid is not allowed play with a ball outside their house. All I ever wanted to do was play football."

"You could forever picture her standing with a ball at her feet, amid the shards from the glass ceiling she shattered. Her legacy flew out on a plane to Australia yesterday."

Her dad died more than 20 years ago, and his anniversary was late last month. To mark it, she put a message on Facebook: "Just miss u so so much and with all that's happening with the women's football I'd do anything to have you here for a chat da."

Because she knows how much of a kick he would get from all this hullabaloo, record crowds and World Cups.

"It's such a pity he's not here to see it," O'Toole adds. "Because we'd be talking about women's football now instead of men's football. He'd have loved that, loved it."

➔ **Magazine**

A winding road to the World Cup

Mary Hannigan tells the story of the Republic of Ireland squad's global journey to Australia

who was clearly still using.

"She was absolutely strung out to bits on crack. She's tried to stop a few times but can't. I told her she needed to stay away from the environment where there were drugs."

"I remember as a teenager, the gang would go down the dock or the off-licence to get drink, but I'd go home. If any of my friends called, I'd have told me Ma to say I was in bed. So that's what I did, I stayed away, hid away. Any excuse not to drink."

She adds wryly: "But I made up for it when I got older!"

First and foremost, O'Toole was a street footballer – as tough as nails and carrying a bagful of silky skills, she was a sledgehammer in a velvet glove, and boy, could she score goals. She honed her skill playing in the flats, spending countless hours protecting a washing pole, a game where hitting it with the ball was the goal.

"You guarded that pole with your life," she recalls.

Often, she would be the only girl playing. Her love for football was part escapism from the social challenges in the area but also part of a deep father-daughter bond.

When she thinks back to her childhood, some of her happiest memories are sitting

down with her dad to watch Match of the Day on Saturday nights. He loved football, so she did too. He was a Man United fan; naturally she was, too. He adored George Best; she followed suit.

"Me and him watched it every Saturday night, religiously," she says.

It was their thing, what they talked about. But soon it was her that was getting talked about in football circles. Word had spread through the football community in Dublin: the kid was special.

She played with the boys until the age of 16 before joining Drumcondra Ladies, suddenly lining out alongside girls in their 20s.

"It was daunting at first but the minute I got on the grass and started playing, I knew I'd never stop."

Her career included spells with Raheny United, Blacklion, Shamrock Rovers and St Catherine's.

She had the option of going to Arsenal at one stage but didn't fancy the terms and conditions, which included washing laundry for the club's first team. There was also the offer of a scholarship from the US, but having left school at 13 the college element was intimidating. She didn't go.

Captaining Ireland was her greatest honour but the rush from scoring goals brought

the greatest high. O'Toole currently coaches Usher Celtic's women and last week she asked the men's coach to stand in goal for a training game, during which she spotted him off his line. O'Toole couldn't resist. A delicate chip, goal. Off she went spinning away in celebration. Old habits die hard.

Sporting heroes

But for all the goodwill towards the Irish women's team right now, O'Toole has been surprised by the tone of some comments tossed in her direction.

"People are asking me if I'm bitter – I don't understand that. Should I be bitter?" she wonders.

"Am I meant to be shouting, 'This shouldn't be happening!' Is that what they want? Do they want me to be angry? Because I'm far from it, I couldn't be happier for the girls. It's amazing."

She played with several of the current team and remembers Aine O'Gorman's first day in the Ireland dressingroom.

"I wrapped my arms around her. 'Are you all right? Welcome to the team, you're here on merit, I'm looking forward to training with you.' Just like that, you could see the relief in her," recalls O'Toole.

Growing up, O'Toole's sporting heroes

were predominantly men. Her only women idols were Steffi Graf and Sonia O'Sullivan. Lately, the trailblazer tag has been pinned on O'Toole often, people telling her she inspired the next generation, who in turn are now inspiring the entire country.

"When it was put to me like that, it made me go red, scarlet, like."

There's a decent chance if you pop down to Fairview Park any Saturday morning you will find her watching an under-11 game, then later in the afternoon she will be casting her eyes on Ireland's under-15s or under-17s in the AUL. But there's a gap until under-20s, and that's a glitch in the system she wants to fix.

"It's the juvenile delinquent period, they're smelling themselves, getting boyfriends, girlfriends," she says. "The challenge is to keep them interested in playing football."

You'd wonder why she cares. But then it has been her life's calling in many ways. She has worked as a recreation officer with Dublin City Council (DCC) for more than two decades, so O'Toole knows more than most the challenges kids in the city face when it comes to accessing sport and maintaining an interest beyond their early teens.

DCC has 13 centres; O'Toole has worked