

It's not how you start the race that matters. It is where you finish. This is where this Ireland team always wanted to be, with a chance in the final game. Even be on the cusp of something special. But did anyone truly believe they would be here? Certainly not after 15 minutes of the opening game, when Roland Sallai rose above a confused Irish defence to glance home Dominik Szoboszlai's corner. Nor after watching Armenia tear the Irish midfield to shreds time and again three days later in Yerevan, when only Caoimhin Kelleher's heroics spared us the most humiliating of scorelines.

Yet by hook or by crook, here they are. In the most unexpected manner possible, Heimir Hallgrímsson and this group of players have rescued this World Cup qualifying campaign and set up this date with destiny against Hungary in the impressive Puskas Arena.

There is a different feel about

By **Mark Gallagher**
IN BUDAPEST

afternoon kick-off (down to UEFA staggering the times of final day qualifiers) is redolent of the Charlton years.

But after delivering that seismic result that we all have craved for a long time, today's task may be more difficult. Following it up.

Having received a jolt of belief and confidence from beating a star-studded Portugal, the team need to keep the curve going upwards. And they must beat a higher-ranked team away from home, something they haven't done since James McClean struck in Cardiff eight years ago.

Most of the pressure will be on a Magyar side, who felt at seven o'clock on Thursday that their 1-0 win in Armenia had secured a play-off spot. All of a sudden, a side that can be flaky have everything to lose. Their wait for a World Cup is even longer than Ireland's – stretching to 40 years next summer – and their autocratic, football-mad Prime Minister Victor Orban has pumped billions of public funds into an effort to replicate the country's glorious past. The likes of Szoboszlai and their coach Marco Rossi have to deliver this afternoon.

That can play into Ireland's hands as can the fact that Hungary only need a draw as it may seep into their minds sub-consciously to adopt a cautious approach. Some players may even fear making a mistake.

'I don't know,' Hallgrímsson countered. 'To be honest, I don't know how they see this game. We don't care. We're trying to focus on us. That's a big task. First of all, focusing after a good game. Building on that one, just realising what it was that created that win and trying to reproduce that.'

'Stop looking at or talking about what happened two days ago. Focus on the next task is now the most important thing. We said we would always take it if we go to the final match and we still have a chance, and everything is in our hands. We grab it. We love the fact

EMOTIONAL RESCUE: Heimir Hallgrímsson yesterday

We thought World Cups were only true in fairytales, there for someone else but not for us, but then we saw his face, now....

HEIMIR BELIEVER

that it's in our hands now.'

Ireland played with courage on Thursday night, but they were able to do so because they knew that things were being kept tight at the back. The defensive improvement in this team over the course of this campaign has become its cornerstone. From conceding four goals in the first

two games (and it could have been four or five in Yerevan), their rearguard has been breached just once in the three matches since – Ruben Neves' injury-time sucker-punch in Lisbon. And it was no coincidence that Séamus Coleman had gone off the field five minutes earlier when that happened.

As admirable as the noticeable

emphasis on solidity has been in the last three games, it has been the recall of Coleman that has been the game-changer. Not selecting him for the first double-header for the biggest mistake that Hallgrímsson has made as Ireland manager – and may yet be what defines this campaign.

'In general, in life, and it applies to football, there's two kinds of people,' the manager said of the Killybegs native. 'People that are vacuums and people that are batteries, that will give energy, will give joy, will give enthusiasm and he is a really, really big battery for this group in so many ways.

'The more Ireland produce peo-

ple like Séamus in the future, it will be better for the football team. But the biggest compliment I can give is he is the biggest battery I have worked with in a football team. Really a man that loves his country and will do anything, not only to shine himself, but to get the best out of everyone around him.'

Nathan Collins, Jake O'Brien and Dara O'Shea have grown with Coleman alongside them in defence, organising and guiding them. It's why, even at 37 years of age, and having spent most of this Premier League season on Everton's bench, he needs to start today. Hallgrímsson admitted that he was tempted to go with the same team that did so well in Dublin, although Ryan Manning's set-piece delivery may give him the nod over Liam Scales, who was excellent against Portugal.

Jayson Molumby will probably return to partner Josh Cullen, who had his best performance for his country against Portugal. Jack Taylor did everything asked of him on Thursday, but the Waterford man's tenacity and tigerishness may be better suited to what could be a battle today and the task of shadowing Szoboszlai.

The Liverpool man can't be given the time and space to exude his class today. And Barnabás Varga will examine Ireland's new-found defensive solidity. The striker is obviously learning a thing or two from Robbie Keane at Ferencváros, having scored four goals in the campaign thus far, three with his head.

Of course, Ireland have a forward of their own at the very top of his game. Even as he casually played a game of keepy-uppy with Molumby and Mikey Johnston before training yesterday, Troy Parrott gave the impression of a player brimful of confidence.

Hungary, and the experienced Willi Orbán, who was their best player in Armenia, will be wary of his threat, but as he showed on Thursday, the way he's playing at present, he only needs half a chance.

The prize is great, so expect it to be taunt and tense this afternoon. And attritional. It will be another test of survival for this Ireland team, but they are finishing strongly and, in a race like this, that can be all that matters.

IRELAND (possible): Kelleher; Coleman, O'Brien, Collins, O'Shea. Manning; Cullen, Molumby, Azaz, O'Connell, Parrott.

HUNGARY (possible): Denes; Loic, Orbán, Szalai, Kerkez, Schafer, Styles, Szoboszlai, Sallai; Bolta, Varga.

REFEREE: Espen Eskås (Norway).

TV: Kick off 2pm. **LIVE** from 1pm RTÉ2.

Ireland's final day dramas

But this one may well be the most tense of the lot...



DURING the spell when Ireland met the Danes on what seemed like a monthly basis, this was the most consequential clash since the 2018 World Cup play-off. Mick McCarthy's side had a mediocre campaign that included a dour goalless draw in Georgia and an even more dour 1-0 win in Gibraltar. But they had given themselves a chance in the final game. They just needed to beat Denmark. Despite a packed Aviva Stadium, it never looked like happening.

EURO 2020
IRELAND 1 DENMARK 1
NOV 18 2019, AVIVA STADIUM

especially after Martin Braithwaite put the visitors ahead in the second half. It meant the home side needed two goals to go through. Matt Doherty levelled late on but they couldn't find a second and the Danes parted (above). Ireland went into the play-offs, where Slovakia got the better of them on penalties.



THE last big result of the Martin O'Neill era. Wales had looked in the box-seat for a play-off, finishing off the campaign with this home game. But on a highly-charged evening, James McClean's strike, which was created by Jeff Hendrick, meant Ireland leap-frogged the Welsh, who had made such waves at Euro 2016. It was an intense and physical battle but Ireland worked their socks off,

2018 WORLD CUP
WALES 0 IRELAND 1
OCT 9 2017, CARDIFF CITY STADIUM

chasing lost causes and generally disrupting Wales' game-plan to inflict the first home defeat on the Dragons in more than four years. Ireland celebrated loudly (above) but got Denmark in the play-offs. The less said about that, the better.

EURO 2016
POLAND 2 IRELAND 1
OCT 11, 2015, WARSAW

ON a tough night in the Polish capital, Martin O'Neill (right) and his side fell one goal short of automatic qualification for France. Ireland could have finished second with a win or a draw of 2-2 or higher, based on the head-to-head record. But it was an uphill task from the moment Grzegorz Krychowiak gave the home side an early lead with a fine strike. Jon Walters equalised soon after from the penalty spot, but Robert Lewandowski's powerful header just before half-time proved to be the winning goal. Irish skipper John O'Shea was sent off late on for a second yellow card. Ireland drew Bosnia in the play-offs, doing enough to reach their second successive Euros.



WARY: Hungary boss Marco Rossi

Ireland are 'frighteningly dangerous' at set pieces, says Hungary boss

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2020 – which ultimately ended in a penalty shootout defeat to Slovakia in the play-off. It is something that seemed a remote prospect after the first double-header only yielded a single point.

Hallgrímsson has a stronger hand to play with this afternoon as both Jayson Molumby and Ryan Manning return from one-match suspensions, but the manager confirmed that Evan Ferguson was unavailable after having a conversation with the Roma striker, who is coming back from an ankle injury.

'He hasn't kicked the ball still. We talked to him and he felt that he would not be able to contribute much. He thinks he would not contribute enough to be in the squad. So, we leave him out. He just continues in Roma with his rehabilitation.'

Ferguson's absence is more than compensated by Troy Parrott's comeback from injury

and the brilliant first-half brace he scored against Portugal. Hallgrímsson was asked if Thursday was a coming-of-age performance for the AZ Alkmaar striker.

'I don't know the background of Troy. I didn't see him play much before,' the manager said. 'Since I came, he's been on the up. We've played him a lot.'

'He started last year, probably the majority of games. He was unlucky injured in September, coming back in October. Coming

from the summer when he was top scorer in Europe, it would have been nice to have him in September. At the moment, he's flying at his club. It's nice to be watching him. It's a really good league for him to be in at the moment and he's enjoying it.'

Hallgrímsson says that he and his coaching staff learned lessons from the first double-header, when Ireland failed to perform in Armenia, and they have been able to manage players' loads, such as Parrott, who came off

midway through the second half against Portugal.

'It's a little bit of everything. Load management, try to be careful on that one. We were lucky that we were leading 2-0 and we could rest players, do substitutions earlier against Portugal. That was a good thing, also giving some players valuable minutes.'

'Load management and then it's psychology. We turned that around from a loss to a win last camp. We lost in Portugal and

then we won the second game against Armenia. It's a little bit of everything and the players are aware of it and do their bit to get a maximum recovery and maximum energy now.'

Meanwhile, Hungarian boss Marco Rossi admitted that his team are under huge pressure in what has been billed as this country's biggest game in 40 years, and cautioned about Ireland's strength at set-pieces.

'We are under enormous pressure to reach the World

Cup,' said Rossi, whose side have featured at the last three European Championships. 'The good news is that from this point of view, our opponent is in the same shoes, and the playoffs are at stake for them too.'

'It is one of the most important 90 minutes of the recent period ahead of us but we shouldn't get too stressed. What we have to pay close attention to are the corners and free-kicks because Ireland is frighteningly dangerous from these.'