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Albanian FA have been in touch, but my boys want to play for Ireland

ALTIN FERIZAJ first heard from the Albanian Football Federation (FSHF) just over four years ago.

It was late 2019 and his Blanchardstown-born son Justin, then at Shamrock Rovers, had won his first Ireland call-up ahead of an Under-15s friendly against England.

This sent alarm bells ringing within the FSHF's Europe-wide network of scouts.

"They got in contact first with Justin via Instagram," Altin recalls. "They were looking to speak with me, the father."

He passed on his number and they got in touch.

"We don't want to disrespect anyone, so when someone wants to speak, you listen. You are not losing anything by listening," he continues.

Interested

"They asked me if Justin would be interested in playing for Albania. I just explained to them that he is only tuning 15, so I am happy where he is now, he is settled down and he is enjoying himself with his friends."

Altin wasn't the only parent to receive a call from an Albanian scout that December.

Ireland won the game 3-1, thanks in no small part to another Blanchardstown youngster with Albanian roots. Kevin Zefi scored twice, while Rocco Vata, whose dad Rudi played for Celtic and won 39 caps for Albania, came off the bench.

"When Justin's name came up as an international player, they wanted to have a look at him," Altin explains. "Albania have scouts all around Europe."

So too does the Polish FA. Whenever an Ireland underage squad lists a youngster with a Polish-sounding surname, they'll have a presence at the game.

Dublin-born former Shelbourne defender Stefan Negru (21), now at Oxford United, has been courted by Moldova, the

came in his native Tallaght, as Ireland hosted the European Under-17 Championships.

Former West Ham striker Mipo Odubeko, now at Martimo in Portugal, was also the subject of an international tug-of-war between Ireland and Nigeria.

The Dubliner opted to remain with the Boys in Green and made his Under-21 debut 11 months ago.

Squad

Bazunu isn't the only member of the current senior squad whose family arrived in Ireland a generation or two ago.

Andrew Omobamidele from Leixlip and Cork's Adam Idah, Dublin-born Michael Obafemi and Wexford native Festy Eboese all have Nigerian heritage, as does arguably the greatest player to ever pull on the

green jersey, Paul McGrath.

And Chiedozie Ogbene became the first African-born player to represent Ireland when he made his debut against Hungary in June 2021.

Born in Lagos, Nigeria, his family moved to Cork when he was a child and he could easily have starred on the Gaelic football pitch. But he opted for the 11-a-side game and now has 19 senior caps and four goals.

A quick glance at recent Ireland underage line-ups and you will see more names such as gifted Cork brothers Franco (18) and Jaden (15) Umeh.

Franco is now at Crystal Palace, while Benfica want to sign Jaden when he turns 16 later this year.

Naj Razi, a 17-year-old of Algerian descent, has already made his first-team breakthrough at Shamrock Rovers,

while Romeo Akachukwu (17) impressed last year in Waterford's promotion-winning campaign.

These are just a few of the players hoping to make it all the way to the senior international side, just like Justin Ferizaj, who last summer moved from Rovers to Serie A side Frosinone.

Official

Altin recalls how an Albanian FA official got in touch to congratulate him on his son's move before it was revealed publicly by either club.

And he now has them calling on the double, with Justin's younger son Richard recently making his international breakthrough.

"Now with Richard as well, the phone calls have increased," he says. "They say, 'We are still

after Justin, but can we have Richard?'"

"I say, 'Did anything change for Justin? No, so nothing is going to change for Richard too.'"

Altin has gotten to know Rudi Vata well in recent years. Unlike Justin and Richard Ferizaj, and Kevin Zefi, Rudi's son Rocco wasn't born in Ireland.

The Celtic youngster is eligible for Ireland through his Irish grandmother on his mother's side, Scotland through birth, and Albania and Montenegro through his father's side of the family.

Rudi explained almost two years ago why his son — who is wanted by Bologna — chose Ireland and why he hadn't followed in his father's footsteps at international level.

"Nobody in the Albanian FA ever contacted me. I know Scotland have watched him but

the Irish association was the first to get in contact," he said.

"They didn't show any kind of respect, desire or professionalism, and if they don't do that, he will never touch a ball for Albania."

"Anything can happen in the future but at the beginning, it is Ireland who have been in touch and shown interest and respect."

Justin's parents moved to Ireland in 1999, six years before he was born.

Reasons

"We just decided to move, not for financial reasons, we just decided to move for a better life in terms of crimes, corruption, that kind of stuff," Altin explains.

"We have settled down, we have five kids and we are happy here."

"The boys have been approached by the Albanian federation to switch, but they have decided to stick with the country

where they were born. They are proud of this. If you were to ask my kids who they wanted to play for, they would say Ireland. They have a lot of friends here."

"When I see them enjoying themselves here, I think 'what's the point in them switching and playing for another country?'. I am happy that they have chosen to play for Ireland."

Altin has watched more underage club and international games than most in recent years, given his two sons' involvements.

He believes the growing diversity within the Irish game will only benefit the country.

"Take Germany for example," he says, "they have players who are German-born, Turkish, Polish... If you go to France you have the same. Italy too; they have two or three players who are from Nigeria."

"Different cultures are play-

ing football and are representing countries where they were born."

"If you see at international level, from the first-team to the underage teams, you have so many non-Irish surnames representing Ireland."

Level

"I think maybe in the next couple of years, you would expect that Ireland at international level is going to get better and better. You are going to have so many talented players and the competition to play for the first-team will be stronger and stronger."

"I would say Irish football is progressing, is moving to a higher and higher level."

ALTIN FERIZAJ ON HOW GRANNY RULE IS NOW A TWO-WAY STREET



FAMILY TIES: Altin Ferizaj with football memorabilia from his two sons Justin and Richard, who are Ireland underage internationals, at his home in Dublin; (right, top) Altin Ferizaj and Justin; (right, bottom) Justin and Richard at Home Farm



THE FUTURE IS BRIGHT: Justin Ferizaj is seen as one of the biggest emerging talents in the Irish football world

Playing for Ireland gives you a sense of belonging – nobody can take that away

HEROICS: Jackie McCarthy O'Brien played soccer and rugby for Ireland



Mark McCadden

WHEN JACKIE McCarthy-O'Brien posted a TikTok video to her 20,000-plus followers around the time of the recent Dublin riots, she received one particularly nasty response.

"Some guy came on and commented, 'Just to let you know, you are just a guest in this country,'" she recalls.

"Now, that's water off a duck's back with me, because I've had that for 60-odd years. But I just felt this time that I needed to reply to it."

"So I did a video with Bob Marley music behind it, and me pointing at my international soccer jersey, my legends soccer jersey and pointing at my international rugby jersey. And I had the caption, 'And you tell me I'm not Irish?'"

The first woman of colour to represent Ireland in both football and rugby, she adds: "That explains what the jersey means to me. It's kind of like a double-whammy. For my friends that played alongside me, it was the honour of representing your country. Yes, it is that as well for me."

Life

"But for me it means the world. I represent my country and I am proud to be Irish. That, for me, is absolutely huge."

"I came to Ireland at two weeks old, born to an Irish mother and a Jamaican father who I'd never met. My mother is out-and-out Limerick and I have grown up all my life in Limerick."

"If we walk down the streets together in Limerick, every second person will go, 'Hi Jackie, how are you?', because of my sport and my visibility as a person of colour."

"Sport for me was absolutely massive. I could genuinely say I wouldn't be alive today if I didn't go on and be able to put my head up as a soccer player and a rugby player. I could

have that pride in myself.

"Now, the minute I got off, it was back to being the n-word and everything else. But to play for Ireland, especially in a sports-mad city like Limerick, it gives you that sense of belonging."

"Playing for Ireland was a survival mechanism more than a love of the sport, if that makes sense. I can put on an Ireland jersey and nobody can take away from me the fact that I'm Irish."

Important

"From that point of view, I would say it's really important for children of colour, from immigrant families, to get involved in sports, because it's inclusive. It makes them more a part of the community."

To get to that point, she says it's crucial that schools play their part, especially when it comes to girls in sport.

While the men's international football teams — at all levels — feature more and more players from immigrant backgrounds, the same can't be said for the women's teams.

"I've done a few chats for clubs and it seems to be very hard to keep women in general in sport," said McCarthy-O'Brien.

"I think the Women's World Cup will help, but in grassroots levels the boys will go on and play GAA through the schools. The schools are not promoting the women's game enough."

"If you can get them at school, then you will have a hope. But if the school isn't promoting it, I can't see children of immigrant parents being as inclined to go to the GAA or soccer club or whatever. They still stay within their own community."

"Whereas if the child picks it up in school, then it's, 'Mam, you've got to drive me to the soccer or GAA or rugby.' We need to get them at grassroots levels and do more in the schools."

QUALITY: Gavin Bazunu is Ireland's first choice goalkeeper