

SUNDAY INDEPENDENT/RTÉ JOINT INVESTIGATION

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SPECIAL
REPORT

Main, from left, Olivia O'Toole, Katie Liston and Jackie McCarthy-O'Brien. Above, the three women during their days playing football for Ireland. Picture by Mark Condren.



In the 1990s, Irish women's football was 'an afterthought' for the FAI. But what almost nobody knew was that young players with big ambitions had their careers derailed and their lives damaged by coaches' highly inappropriate behaviour. This is their story



Mark Tighe
and Marie Crowe



I. THE INTERNATIONAL TEAM

When *The Late Late Show* hosted a special on Irish soccer in May 2022 to celebrate the Football Association of Ireland's (FAI) centenary, host Ryan Tubridy was joined by guests including President Michael D Higgins and former international players from the Jack Charlton era.

On air, the President gave commemorative medals to Packie Bonner, Shay Given, David O'Leary, Niall Quinn and two former women internationals, Paula Gorham and Olivia O'Toole.

Despite talk on the show about how women's football had taken great strides towards equality, neither Gorham nor O'Toole, the record goalscorer for the women's team, were invited to join their male counterparts to be interviewed by Tubridy.

It was not that snub, however, that is O'Toole's burning memory of the night. Instead, it was an unexpected encounter with her former international manager that awakened a long-buried grievance. Among the invited guests from Irish football in the audience that night was Mick Cooke, manager of the Ireland women's team from 1992 to 2000.

After leaving the Ireland role, Cooke managed and coached men's teams in the League of Ireland, but most recently he has been the head-coach of the Dublin City University women's team. "The *Late Late* was a bad experience for me, I didn't think he'd have been there," O'Toole says. "It just brought everything back. Everything. And I hate the fact that it's nearly 25 years

later – and I still get upset about that." O'Toole breaks down and cries over the feelings of frustration, anger and guilt her former manager stirs in her.

"And I get upset about it because I'm annoyed with myself that I didn't do anything about it," she says. "It kills me, kills me, that I didn't do anything about it years ago. But that's my fault. Not speaking up, not doing enough."

When Cooke approached her at the *Late Late Show* special, O'Toole, who had brought her mother as her guest, could barely hide her contempt.

Although she wanted to excoriate Cooke, O'Toole saw he was with his wife and did not want to appear rude.

O'Toole remembers Cooke offering his hand, but she replied with a whispered retort of "How dare you?" before abruptly turning away.

She says Cooke knew exactly why she was so angry.

"My ma saw me getting upset," says O'Toole. "My ma just put her hands around me and said, 'Don't mind him, don't mind him.'"



Apparently, I was the best player in Ireland at the time and I'd been dropped



OLIVIA O'TOOLE

A diminutive left-footed player who hails from Sheriff Street in Dublin, Olivia O'Toole is widely regarded as one of the most gifted female footballers this country has ever produced.

Coming from a community where some of her friends, including her sister Julie, became addicted to drugs like heroin, O'Toole instead poured her heart into playing football.

She scored a late winner in her Ireland debut in a European Championship qualifier against Spain in Seville in 1991 and still remembers a solitary Irish flag among the 7,000 Spanish fans in attendance.

The Irish women's team was run by the Ladies Football Association of Ireland (LFAI), an affiliate of the FAI, but as executives and board members from the 1990s readily admit, women's football was very much "an afterthought" for the association at that time.

Since the 2017 international team strike and the 2023 first World Cup appearance, women's football has grown exponentially in Ireland. The FAI says that of 325,000 players, 78,000 are women and girls, with a 27pc rise in the number of girls playing since 2022. Throughout the 1990s, however, the international team struggled to make an impact or garner support from the public or the FAI.

A proud Irish woman, playing for her country was everything for O'Toole, who now works as a community support officer for Dublin City Council.

"Putting on the jersey and listening to your national anthem, it's just an unbelievable feeling," she says.

Although she has been regularly interviewed about her time as an Ireland player, before now O'Toole has never spoken publicly about a secret from the Mick Cooke era that she has kept buried for 25 years. Although injured

for the last match of 1997, O'Toole said she was available for games for all of 1998, but was not selected from November 1997 to September 2000. In total, she missed 14 games, even though she was then in her 20s and "in the prime of my career".

Many wondered at the time why O'Toole was excluded.

After Cooke was replaced as Ireland manager by Noel King in the summer of 2000, O'Toole was recalled and played internationally for nine more years.

The *Sunday Independent* and RTÉ had separately been in touch with O'Toole since October 2021 after she sent out cryptic social media messages. The posts referred to revelations in America that Paul Riley, an English coach, had sexually harassed players he managed in the National Women's Soccer League.

O'Toole was initially hesitant to detail her experience. However, not long after meeting Cooke on *The Late Late Show*, she agreed to tell her story.

She was the first of over a dozen women who agreed to be interviewed in what became a unique joint-investigation by the *Sunday Independent* and RTÉ *Investigates* into the treatment of female footballers in the 1990s.

O'Toole says she became aware Cooke was behaving inappropriately with other players. At the time in the late 1990s, the team's training base was the former Christian Brothers seminary in Marino, north Dublin.

She says: "I just seen a few things

that after training at dinner, just stuff that shouldn't have been happening in an environment with girls. Like even just putting your arm around a girl and talking to her and being in a room on your own with a girl. Just stuff like that I didn't like, but it wasn't my place to say anything."

Asked about what happened, O'Toole momentarily dissolves into tears.

"When I speak about it I get upset. I don't know why," she says. "I get upset because, what I seen, it ruined my career."

O'Toole believes her witnessing of Cooke behaving inappropriately was the reason she was dropped from the team for two years. She remembers him announcing the match squad in Marino and leaving her name out.

"His words were, 'If you have a problem that you haven't been picked, you know where I am. Come to me,'" O'Toole recalls. Despite encouragement from her oblivious teammates, she did not feel comfortable confronting Cooke.

"The minute I didn't hear my name, my heart just sank down to my heels," O'Toole says. "I said to myself, 'You can't do this, you can't do this'. Apparently, I was the best player in Ireland at the time and I'd been dropped from a 23-[player] squad because of what I'd seen."

She confided in a senior playing colleague, who has confirmed to this investigation that O'Toole told her she had witnessed Cooke behaving inappropriately.

O'Toole says she informed her fam-

ily about what happened and how she felt helpless to do anything about it.

She confronted one of Cooke's assistants in the weeks after when she heard it was put about that she had been dropped because she had missed training. She says this was "bullshit". At the time, she had kept taxi receipts from her trips to Marino to prove she had not missed any sessions.

She describes her exclusion from the national team as "two years of hell".

"All the delegates... I just couldn't understand why not one of them turned around and said, 'Olivia, what really happened?' I was never asked. I was at my peak. I'm not throwing roses at myself. I just know my own ability."

She concentrated on her club football and won the double with Shamrock Rovers in 1999. An *Irish Times* match report of the August 1999 Women's FAI Cup final noted that O'Toole's teammates wore T-shirts under their jerseys emblazoned with "The Real Irish Team". The T-shirts were reported to be a "jibe" at Mick Cooke's decision to exclude O'Toole, who scored the opening goal in the final, from an upcoming away glamour friendly against the USA, who were then the world champions.

After she was recalled to the team following Cooke's departure in 2000, O'Toole returned to scoring goals for Ireland. She won the International Player of the Year award in 2001 and played for Ireland until 2009.

She regrets that she did not do more to blow the whistle in 1998.

In response to queries, a statement from Cooke's solicitor said O'Toole had missed "up to 80pc" of training sessions. He claimed two senior team representatives complained about this and his management team took a collective decision to drop O'Toole from the squad. She was not dropped for any other reasons, the statement says. He denied ever acting inappropriately with players.

O'Toole says the allegations that she missed the majority of training sessions are completely untrue. Three senior players from that team said they were unaware of any complaint from players being made about O'Toole to management.

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