# SUNDAY INDEPENDENT/RTÉ JOINT INVESTIGATION



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



# THE INTERNATIONAL TEAM

hen *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."





#### **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 ŘTÉ 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 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."

that after training at dinner, just stuff

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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# FIELD OF BROKEN DREAMS

# 'How do I get out of here? What do I do? Do I give him a kick, or a slap?'

#### Continued from page 17

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"He [Cooke] knows if he left me there, I'd have stopped it," she says. "And it kills me that I didn't actually do it the way it's supposed to be done. But I was angry and I was sad. I was crying. I just got angrier and angrier... and I just said to myself in the end, 'F\*\*k them!' I didn't know where to turn.'

This investigation has spoken to three former internationals who say Cooke made advances on them while they played under him for Ireland between 1992 and 2000. Others allege he created a homophobic atmosphere in the camp. The effect on some of the women was to put them off wanting to play for Ireland, or even watching games



#### JACKIE McCARTHY-O'BRIEN

Five years before Olivia O'Toole's exclusion from the Irish team, Jackie McCarthy O'Brien, the first black woman to play for Ireland, says she had an encounter with Cooke that she believes brought about the end of her international career.

Bv 1993, McCarthy-O'Brien had won 13 caps. Growing up in Limerick in the 1960s, she believed she was one of just four children of colour in the city. She says she was such a rarity that children would sometimes try and lick her hand to see if she tasted of chocolate.

As a child who had been bullied over her skin colour, representing Ireland was not only an achievement that affirmed her Irishness, it fulfilled a childhood promise she made to her teacher.

McCarthy-O'Brien recalls Rita Spring her sixth-class teacher, trying to console her after having a "run-in" with another child.

"She said to me, 'You know what? People are going to off to Spain to get your colour," McCarthy-O'Brien recalls fondly.

The teacher told her to hold her head up and to concentrate on what she was good at, which was football. When the teacher said she should go on to play for Ireland McCarthy-O'Brien thought she was joking. But the 12-year-old agreed to "make a deal" and shook hands on a romise to play for her country

'Between herself and Dad, every time I played for Ireland and I was singing Amhran na bhFiann, it's the two of them I was singing it to, not everybody in the stadium," McCarthy-O'Brien says. "It was like, 'You were right, I made it'. And you can't underestimate the power of somebody giving you that encourage-

ment as a shy 12- or 13-year-old." McCarthy-O'Brien had three children early in her life, but she was always quickly back on the field after giving birth. By the early 1990s, she had separated from her husband and had come out as a gav woman

Although she was 32 in 1993, McCarthy-O'Brien believed she had years left in the tank.

She worked three jobs to help finance her trips to train with the Ireland squad in Dublin. Early in the mornings, she cleaned toilets in a pub before returning home to get her children up for school. She then worked as a youth development officer in Moyross. After her kids returned from school and she had cooked their dinners, she worked evenings in a local sports hall.

Even with three jobs, she was also grateful for contributions of cash or sports kit from neighbours, her family or her local football club to ensure she could keep travelling to Dublin.

In October 1993, McCarthy-O'Brien played as a substitute in a match against Northern Ireland, her 13th international appearance. Afterwards, she remembers Cooke passing her in the lobby of the Sligo Southern, the team's hotel, and asking her to meet him in his room. She had never been called to the man-

ager's room before, so she was anxious as she knocked on his door. She had heard rumours among the squad that Cooke had hit on some players, but she thought, as an openly gay woman, this would not be a concern for her. Still, she had made a quick plan with

a friend who had come to see the match that if she had not reappeared after a few minutes, her friend would come looking for her.

In the room, she said Cooke asked her to sit on his bed and they began talking about the match.

"I thought I was safe because I was gav," savs McCarthy-O'Brien. "And then the next thing, it's like he's leaning over and grabbing you by the shoulders to kiss you and kisses you on the lips. And I'm like, gobsmacked. Gobsmacked." She was quickly thinking how she

could extricate herself from the situation. "How do I get out of here? What do I do? Do I give him a kick? Do I give him a slap? Oh, there's the end of your career - it's kind of a life flashing before you in a few seconds and you just go numb," she says. Her friend then knocked on the door.

"Thank God for her because when she knocked on that door and I heard her, I just jumped off that bed and said, 'I've got to go'. That was the last time I ever spoke to the man. The last time I ever wore an Irish jersey," she says.

McCarthy-O'Brien would never again get a call up to the Irish football squad. Showing she was not a spent force as an athlete, she went on to play rugby union for Munster and earned 13 international caps for Ireland in that code.

"I had nobody to go to and say what had happened," she says of her last encounter with Cooke. "Who do you go to? I'm sure I'm not the only one that this happened to. But you're in an environment where you just have to keep - if you want to wear that jersey – you have to keep schtum. She blames Cooke for taking away

something that had been a key part of her dentity and tarnishing the sport for her. "I had nobody to turn to because it ould be, 'Oh, Jackie, you were coming o the end of your career," she says. "I layed seven years of international rugby

after that, so I wasn't ready to give in." McCarthy-O'Brien says she was angry, pset and felt a sense of loss over her eatment by Cooke and her exclusion rom the Irish team.

"It was like a slap in the face," she says. "I started life in an industrial school because of the colour of my skin and my mother being unmarried, and the priest and the nuns came and just took me," she says.

"I had to fight hard to keep my head up. Soccer done that for me and playing for Ireland done that for me. But that man single-handedly, for a little while, put me back in that industrial school by what he took from me, my sense of purpose, my sense of being.

"I'm not the only one. We all have our stories. That's mine. You shouldn't have to sleep with somebody to play

for Ireland. Cooke denies kissing McCarthy-O'Brien and says he never kissed any player. He said McCarthy-O'Brien was dropped for

"footballing reasons" She is speaking out now because she does not want other players to have to deal with the "devastation" of having their coach hit on them.

For almost 30 years, McCarthy-O'Brien could not bring herself to watch Ireland football matches. "I lost my appetite for it completely," she says



# **KATIE LISTON**

A recurring theme from many of the gay women who played for Ireland under Cooke was the homophobic atmosphere created by the coach.

One person who experienced this first-hand was Katie Liston, now a lecturer in sociology in the University of Ulster. She was a 22-year-old new recruit in the Ireland squad ahead of a November 1994 friendly against France at Turner's Cross in Cork.

Both the senior and under-20s teams had games that day, and both squads travelled together to be coached by Cooke. Liston, who played inter-county Gaelic football for Kerry and was an athletics star in her teens, got into soccer when she moved to Dublin to study sociology in UCD in the mid-1990s.

She found soccer was a more "urban" sport than she was used to in the GAA, with a heavy drinking culture among the players and coaches that she was not accustomed to. She was impressed by the senior players who set the standards in training

Before she could establish herself as a fixture in the Ireland set-up, her desire to play international football was unexpectedly extinguished.

She remembers Cooke and his assistant, Bobby Geoghegan, pulling her aside at the team hotel in Cork in November 1994 before a match against France.

"At the time, I thought it was on the pretence of perhaps getting some feedback on how I was playing or how we were to play, ways to improve," says Liston about Cooke. "But it was nothing to do with football. I was told that they were 'getting rid of the lesbians' and that had a chilling effect on me.

"I can recall exactly where I was sitting, the noise that was around me in the hotel fover. It wasn't a conversation, because I didn't have a voice. And I knew then that my international career was over before it had ever really started." A gav woman who won four All-Ire-

lands with Kerry and who also played international rugby for Ireland, Liston says Cooke's comment about removing gay players from the squad deeply unsettled her

"The effect of that conversation was to reinforce the shame that I was trying to unshackle," she says. "So, psychologically I checked out, in a sense. I'll always have that unanswered question about myself. Had I responded differently. would my international career have been different?'



Liston questions how the football authorities had a system so "dysfunctional" that the national women's team boss was taking a young player aside to as I got up. I didn't like it and just left tell her they were getting the gays out of the tean

"It's a different era," Liston acknowledges. "I guess there wasn't the same only 18, now felt very uncomfortable in safeguarding, and it's important to the Ireland set-up. Worse was to come acknowledge that. But in that environment, when you're isolated, you have very little opportunity but to be compliant if you want to try and secure on a chair in teammate Katie Liston's your international career. That's the room, she was told to "get the f\*\*k out" very worst kind of a power imbalance." She is unsure what Cooke's motivations were, but as a gay woman, the

comments made her feel nauseous. "My overriding sense was that gay women were being stigmatised, that deviant, maybe even predatory, that

they were a social ill Cooke worked for the Irish Prison trades such as painting. Geoghegan, a fellow prison service staffer, worked with him as a trainer with the women's team. Liston says there was a feeling that the Ireland coach and his assistant Geoghegan were always keeping a close cer," Alice recalls. Asking what Cooke eye on the women to stop them going meant by this, she says he told her that if into each other's rooms.

Before the match against France. Ireland had played Northern Ireland away and stayed in the Regency Hotel preted the situation and that she had gathered, Liston remembers Cooke would forget about it – but she had to working the room and buying drinks give him a kiss. for the players in the hotel foyer and bar. She was warned that Cooke was 'on the pull" by a senior player and witnessed him inviting players to sit on his knee.

She describes Cooke as "being overly friendly to the players". Liston says that when Cooke was wearing shorts, "he loved showing off his legs and a lump on his thigh" that

was "some kind of leftover injury". "Even though it was covered that night by his civvies, he was still trying to do that," she says. "There was alcohol involved. I would describe him as being directly flirtatious, as seeking to build relationships with players that were nothing to do with football."

Aware that other women have come forward to tell their stories from the Cooke era. Liston feels there were many whose hopes and lives were negatively affected by their experience in the Irish camp

"Probably the most abiding feeling I have is one of anger," she says. "And it's followed closely by sheer sadness at the this what it's all about? I couldn't get field of broken dreams that's been left behind in all of this. Not my own, but for all those women that are involved in this process.

# **'ALICE**'

One of those young players who said she directly experienced unwanted advances from Cooke is a Alice, not her real name

A pacey player, she made her debut in an away win against Northern Ireland in October 1994. She thought she had plaved well.

She was, however, already apprehensive about the coaching set-up because she had witnessed Cooke being verbally aggressive with players during training. After the Northern Ireland match, Alice, like Katie Liston, returned with the

team to the Regency Hotel. As the players and coaches enjoyed some drinks that evening in the hotel bar, Alice remembers Cooke pulling her down on to his lap.

"I was grabbed by the hips to sit on one of the coaches' knees and as I was passing by to 'give us a song', and as I sat down I felt a lump and I kind of got up really, really quickly," Alice says, referring to Cooke. A number of sources who know Cooke say he had muscle protrusion on one of

his upper thighs "It was a lump that came outward, so it was like a cyst on the outside of his leg," Alice recalls. "So he pulled me ended up attending. He also offered to

back down and wiggled me hip and he 🗄 put me up in his house as digs for the savs. 'Have some fun on that' Alice says the group were laughing

alise what had happened. "So I kind of just made my getaway

that situation," she says. From the buzz and elation of having made her Ireland debut, Alice, who was ahead of the next match a month later against France in Cork.

When Geoghegan found her sitting and to get back to her own room. She was not to be in another player's bedroom, he admonished. She protested that they were just talking.

Some time later, Cooke and his assistant arrived at her door. After she let they were not welcome, that they were them in, she was told to sit on her bed. She was asked about why she had been in another player's room.

Alice remembers Cooke warning her Service, helping to train inmates in that she was like "new blood" to the older players

"He said, These are all vampires here and if you want to ride whoever you want to ride, you're not going to do it while you're playing international socshe wanted to stay in the Ireland team "don't be with anybody".

Protesting that Cooke had misinternorth Dublin afterwards. As the team a boyfriend, she says Cooke said they



He's giggling and laughing. I went into the bathroom and I physically got sick... **Ihad no one to talk to** 

"I'm at the end of the bed and, like, I did and they left." Alice says "And he's giggling and laughing and walked out of the room and I was left physically ... I went into the bathroom and I physically got sick and my head was wrecked. "I had no one to talk to. I had no one to tell my story to. I didn't want to be

that person, and would they believe me? What just happened? Is it normal? Is mv head around it.' She could barely sleep that night and

subsequently played a terrible game. She remembers being described as "not the horse for the course" in one match report

"That made it worse because if they only knew what I just had to deal with the night before." Alice says.

Neither the LFAI nor FAI, she says. made her aware of anyone she could have reported her concerns to at that time. The LFAI had no safeguarding policies in place in the 1990s, but says it encouraged players to speak to its delegates if they had concerns.

Geoghegan did not respond to requests to comment. Cooke said in a letter from his solicitor that neither incident described by Alice happened. "Mr Cooke never had any protrusion on his leg." the letter said.

Alice continued to play at a high standard at club level, but after consulting a friend in the national team she decided

not to play for Ireland again. Players suspected that Cooke was in a relationship with at least one player. Siobhan Furlong, a player from Waterford who was then 28 years old, has confirmed she had an intermittent personal relationship with Cooke.

She says: "In 1992, when my family's business came to an abrupt end, Mick Cooke informed me of an FAI soccer coaching course which was running in Clondalkin Leisure Centre, which I course duration

"At a very exciting and vulnerable

a personal relationship ensued. Thirty-two years later, it is not something I'm proud of." Furlong says she was not aware of Cooke behaving inappropriately with

any of her teammates Alice says the fact that Cooke was suspected of being in an intimate relationship with a senior player meant younger players were reluctant to approach some older players to voice their concerns about the manager.

She is speaking out now because, she says, it is time the public knew what happened with Irish international footballers.

# **'BARBARA'**

This investigation has spoken to another international player who says Cooke created a homophobic atmosphere in the Irish camp. The woman, Barbara, not her real name, was determined to make it as a professional footballer as a teenager

She remembers sitting in Spanish class in school as a 15-year-old and her headmaster knocking on the door to let her know she had been called in to the Irish under-16s team. "I was absolutely thrilled just to get

the respect that was there for women. that letter. I just thought, 'Wow, I'm and everybody took it so seriously. They playing for Ireland," she says. wanted us to win. They wanted us to be At the time, Cooke coached both the the best. And then when I came home under-age teams and the senior womand I saw that there was a new man-

en's team. Barbara says she was like a "little puppy" and thought Cooke was her hero Barbara knew she was gay from an

early age and felt comfortable being "out" in the Ireland set-up, something she believed changed Cooke's attitude to her.

"When Mick became aware of that, for me to say that I played for Ireland I think that's when the relationship because the standard was so low," she changed, because I know wholeheartsays. "We'd be given our gear when edly as an under-age player I was very, we arrived at the airport, not before. Changing in toilets, being warned that very good," she says.

As a 17-year-old, she remembers Cooke talking to her after training about her relationship with another one of the girls on the team, someone who was very pretty" and the same age as her. She says Cooke asked her "what we got up to" and "how did we have sex"

Barbara tears up as she recalls Cooke asking her why the "pretty" player was with her "I let him finish his wording or whatever

and I just went back into the changing room" she says "Sometimes as a child subconsciously it goes to the back of your head – or you just, from that point on, feel, 'Wow', I've done something really wrong here'. That was the start of it."

Barbara remembers Geoghegan as someone she thought was "uncomfortable" with the manager's behaviour towards gay players. Barbara coaches now, and says it is a coach's job to make players better, but that was not her experience with Cooke.

"A coach's job is to make a good player great," she says. "You may not be able to make a good player great, but you can make a good person a better person. And he did not do that. He made you feel like you were dirty, you've done something wrong and you really don't deserve to be here." She describes Cooke as "a very ego-

tistic man". Barbara was not "out" to her parents at the time. She says Cooke warned her that he would tell her parents about her sexuality when admonishing her for being late to a team meeting.

"So I was pretty much putty in their

hands, wasn't I really?" she says. "I was

She felt uncomfortable in the inter-

national set-up despite making sev-

eral appearances for the senior side.

Barbara felt her game suffered due to

the stress and anxiety she felt being in

Barbara was eventually told by Cooke

before a match the following year that

he was dropping her from the squad as

to," Barbara says. "It was mostly a male

environment all the time. And some-

times Olivia [O'Toole] would speak up

and say things if there was something

"We had nobody there to go and talk

terrified. Terrified."

camp with Cooke.

she appeared to be tired.

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she didn't agree with. But again, she and

many of us did not have the language

to say anything because you would've

Barbara also felt she could not ap

proach senior players for help as she

uspected some were in relationships

While Cooke "absolutely wanted all

the pretty ladies in the poster and the

picture", she says, he made his disdain

"He didn't like that I was a gay wom

an. I had nothing to offer him," she says.

ears after she finished playing. "I hat-

She could not watch football for 10

Although delighted that the current

rish team qualified for a World Cup and

that they have players who can openly

speak about being gay, Barbara says she

is speaking about her own experience

to help ensure no one else experiences

"Nothing is perfect, but I just hope

what she went through.

it's safer," she says.

**LISA CURRAN** 

and coaching

O'Toole was dropped.

that was hard."

Lisa Curran, an attacking midfielder from

Dublin, was one of the few Irish players

in the 1990s to become a professional

and spent three years playing in Italy

She says her experience of the pro

fessional coaching system for Serie

A clubs meant she was not willing to

tolerate poor coaching in the Irish na-

tional team. She describes herself as

the "Roy Keane of the women's team"

because she was always complaining

about the poor standards of facilities

She played for Cooke after he was ap-

pointed in 1992, but then was dropped

for five years after a row with him. She

was recalled by Cooke five years later

in late 1997. around the time Olivia

"Before I went to Italy, I accepted that

behaviour," she says. "I went to Italy

and I saw how you should be treated.

saw how you should be trained. I saw

ager, I just thought he would change

things from what came before him, but

he didn't. He was actually worse, and

Curran says the poor standards of

training and inadequate facilities drained

"I think it was almost embarrassing

we had to have everything back to them

when we got off the plane. No, it was

embarrassing. I never felt pride at all."

One of the reasons she came back in

1997 was that she wanted to "expose"

Cooke for his bad behaviour as manager.

She believed he was homophobic, overly

aggressive and was having relationships

ring to the homophobia. "I don't know

why anyone would think it was hidden.

There was a culture of fear among

the players at the time that prevented

them confronting Cooke, Curran says.

up to him?' If we all stood up to him, he

couldn't be the bully he was," she says.

"But I was on my own. I was always on

my own. So I ended up going. There was

no point, and I walked away from it."

**BERNARD O'BYRNE** 

FAI CEO, 1996-2001

future CEO John Delaney.

Protection

in the 1990s.

The CEO of the FAI between 1996 and

2001 was Bernard O'Byrne. He is prob

ably best known for pushing the FAI

to build a new stadium, Eircom Park,

ternal FAI opposition, including from

O'Byrne readily admits the running

of women's football during his time at

the FAI was almost an afterthought

women's football was run by the LFA

Its head was Niamh O'Donoghue, a civil

servant who would become secretary

general of the Department of Social

O'Donoghue was one of two LFAI

delegates who represented women's

football on the FAI's governing council

Part of the reason for that was that

in Citywest. The plan was foiled by in-

"I was like, 'Why can't you just stand

"It was never hidden," she says, refer

with some of the players.

It was open."

her will to play for her country.

or lesbians in the team clear.

been completely dismissed

with Cooke

ed it." she savs.

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# FIELD OF BROKEN DREAMS

O'Byrne says women's sport was in a "very different" place in the 1990s to where it is now, with high-profile play ers like Katie McCabe and sponsors like Sky and Cadbury's.

"And within football it was as though they operated in a little bubble over there," O'Byrne says. "There was no agenda against them, but there was no great interest in ladies football from the majority of people that were sitting around the board of the FAI. It's just the way it was in those days."

O'Bvrne thought it was "an easy option" to let the LFAI have free rein running women's football. He knew O'Donoghue to be a "formidable woman", so he was confident she had everything in hand.

"I'd have to say that in the five, fiveand-a-half years I was there. I never had to deal with any controversies or with any major issues from the ladies," he says. "They just were there. I went as chief executive, did the occasional match or function or whatever. And I suppose I ticked that box that I'd done my duty. Obviously, if you were there now you'd be all over the ladies' football and really interested in it. But it's just times have changed."

While he had been involved in negotiating Mick McCarthy's contract as men's manager and later appointed Brian Kerr to the role, O'Byrne was not involved in renewing Cooke's contract. Despite this hands-off approach, 24 vears later O'Byrne has a clear memory of his only meeting with the women's team manager, in 2000, just as rumours were circulating that Cooke was about to be replaced by Noel King.

He remembers it so well because Cooke turned up at the FAI's then headquarters at 80 Merrion Square without an appointment and demanded to see the CEO.

Chris Ryan, O'Byrne's personal assistant, informed her boss that Cooke seemed "quite upset", so O'Byrne agreed to give him 10 minutes before lunch. Cooke was so agitated that he refused

to take a seat and remained standing throughout the meeting. "And it wasn't so much a meeting as a rant, really, by Mick," O'Byrne says

"He was very upset." O'Byrne said Cooke's immediate words were that there was "disgraceful stuff

going on in the senior international dressing room". "I remember him saying, 'They're all

gay and they're undermining me as a coach and it's not fair and something needs to be done about it," O'Byrne says. Cooke also said it was not "fair" for him to bring young girls in to the international set-up.

After gathering his thoughts on what he believed was a "homophobic rant", O'Byrne says he asked Cooke if he expected him as CEO to go into the team dressing room to tell the players to respect their manager. He told him if that was the case, Cooke had already lost the dressing room, and that as CEO he would not be interfering.

He told Cooke that if this was a serious complaint, he would need to put it in writing or bring in somebody to corroborate it. O'Byrne says Cooke immediately declined to follow up on his complaint.

"He says, 'I'm just telling you executive," O'Byrne recalls. He says Cooke also aggressively warned him that he "can't tell anybody that you didn't know" as he left.

O'Byrne decided not to contact Niamh O'Donoghue as he believed he had nothing concrete to tell her. Cooke had already made it clear he would not elaborate or provide specifics about his complaint The FAI CEO concluded that it had

been a "bitter rant from somebody who was heading towards the exit door", so he dismissed it as a bizarre meeting As CEO, O'Byrne had to deal with abuse complaints involving players and

coaches, but all such cases in his time involved schoolboys. No cases emerged from girls' or women's football. He admits the FAI had no system in

place in the 1990s for dealing with child welfare and safeguarding complaints. Instead, in 2000, O'Byrne approached Chief Justice Liam Hamilton, in his capacity as chairman of the International Fund, a benevolent body, to help pay for the development of a new code of ethics. Written by a social worker, it set out "proper conduct" rules for those involved in football.

"Now, people might look at that and say, well, that was kind of just a gesture and I'd accept that it was a gesture, but it was a well-meant gesture and nobody else was doing anything," O'Byrne says. The FAI sent thousands of copies of the

code to clubs and said they were to be made available for parents and players. "Whether it helped or whether it did anything, I don't know," says O'Byrne. "But we hadn't got our heads in the sand on the issue of abuse. It was really a dark part of my job."

Told that Cooke had been in a consensual relationship with one of his players, that it has been alleged he made unwanted advances on at least two others and that players say he made homophobic remarks to others, O'Byrne said he was "shocked".

"If I'd have known anything about that, he wouldn't have stayed in the job for five minutes," he says. "And I personally would've seen to that. Because I had seen the damage and upset that had been caused in the cases that I was looking at. And I certainly would've addressed that."

O'Byrne concedes that his lack of knowledge of what was happening with the international team may have been a result of the hands-off approach the FAI had with the LFAI.

"Maybe it was a function of what" described earlier. Unless we hear something, just keep going. No news is good news, you know?" he says. "Looking back, how many things you'd have done differently, and certainly that's a real shocker to me."



#### IIAMH O'DONOGHUE LFAI CHAIR, 1989-2016

Niamh O'Donoghue issued a writter response to questions asked of her by this investigation. She chaired the LFAI, on and off, from 1989 to 2016, being re-elected each year. In some years she was simultaneously president and chair of the association.

She says the LFAI in the 1990s was run by a committee of eight to 10 volunteers with minimal support from the FAI.

O'Donoghue says LFAI safeguarding measures put in place in the mid- to late 1990s, following the introduction of under-age teams, were "significantly ahead of any requirements at that time". This included supervised collection from train and bus stations for residential camps and the provision of meals and

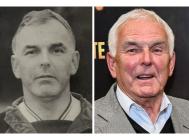
adult supervision at accommodation. "All of this was provided by the volunteers on the committee," O'Donoghue says. "We were proud of what we put in place and were given no reason to see that there were any shortcomings in this regard. The members of the committee repeatedly advised players, both adult and under-age, that if they were concerned about any issues they should speak to one of the LFAI committee, as opposed to the coaching

staff, who would be the decision-make ers in relation to team selection etc." While issues in relation to gear, payment of travel expenses and other issues were raised. O'Donoghue says she had no knowledge of anyone rais ing any concerns about Cooke's behaviour with players until alerted by this nvestigation in 2023.

This was a "complete surprise" to her. Asked about Olivia O'Toole's absence from the team for two years. O'Dono ghue says: "Neither I nor any of the other volunteers on the LFAI committee had any involvement in the selection of players for the national team. That would have been a matter for the head coach of the team."

O'Donoghue was always available and willing to meet any player, she says. She met O'Toole "on many, many occasions over the last 20-odd years", but O'Toole never mentioned anything to her about the reason Cooke dropped her from the squad, she says. Neither did any other players try to alert her to concerns when she attended hundreds of football events over the last 30 years, she says.

"As a volunteer who dedicated time over many, many years to the development of women's football in Ireland, I have been shocked and upset at the emergence of these allegations. I did not know anything about them and am extremely saddened that those who allegedly were aware of any wrongdoing did not, or felt they could not, bring it to my attention or the attention of anyone else on the LFAI/WFAI committee. I am also completely saddened at the idea that any player would have to endure such appalling behaviour."



MICK COOKE TEAM MANAGER,

On March 15 this year, the FAI used its powers to issue a "stand down" notice to Mick Cooke, who had been the head

Having learned of some of the details of this investigation through the Professional Footballers Association of Ireland (PFAI) seeking to secure support for counselling for the players, the FAI used its safeguarding rules to prevent Cooke having any ongoing role in footbal while it investigates the matters raised.

denied any wrongdoing. "Mr Cooke is a 73-year-old married man, a father and grandfather," it said. "He has been involved in football all

subject of any complaint or allegation Every issue and complaint made by the women interviewed by this investi-

gation was denied by Cooke. He denied ever making a homophobic comment to any player. He denied making a "homophobic rant" to Bernard O'Byrne. He denied knowing of Barbara's sexual orientation and denied ever making inappropriate comments to her and said he never threatened to "out her" to her parents. He said if he ever went to a player's room, it was in the company of a third party. He also denied having a relationship with Siobhan Furlong, and insisted she only stayed in his house for about 14 days.

Cooke's response said his lawyers had spoken to people who had knowledge of the international team in the 1992 to 2000 period and they expressed "shock" at the allegations made.

"They were of the view that the atmosphere around the international team during Mr Cooke's tenure as manager was excellent, he fostered a great team spirit and many of the players often expressed the view it was the time of their lives," the response said.





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# 2. THE LEIXLIP FÁS COURSE

# 'Soccer was the only thing that I was good at. Afterthatitjust destroyed me'

n late July 1996, local newspapers around the country carried notices about an exciting opportunity for young women and teenage girls who dreamed of careers in football.

"The Ladies Football Association of Ireland (LFAI) is pleased to announce that, in association with FÁS. a full-time soccer skills course for girls will commence in September 1996," it said. "The course, which is the first of its kind in this country for girls, will be based in Leixlip, Co Kildare."

Unemployed 16- to 25-year-olds "who had a proven talent for Association football" would be paid just over £100 a week for 36 weeks. They would obtain a coaching qualification and other training certificates on completion of the course.

First established in 1989, FÁS football courses were designed to provide an opportunity for budding players to stay n Ireland while training full-time. The most famous graduate is Roy Keane, who was on a FAS course in Palmerstown while also playing League of Ireland football for Cobh Ramblers, when he



n September 1996. untry. Interested applicants should o to their local Fas Office and r the course

1992-2000

coach of the DCU women's team from September 2022 to March 2024.

In a letter from his solicitor, Cooke

his life and has never before been the

of the nature you now make."



Full Time Soccer Skills: Course For Girls The Ladies Football Associa ion of Ireland is pleased to announce that, in association with

Fas, a full time soccer skills course for girls will commence The course, which is the first of its kind in this country for

irls, will be based in Leixlip, o. Kildare. The duration of the ourse is expected to be thirtyweeks. Although based in dare, the course is open:to: girls from anywhere in the

omplete an application form Closing date for receipt of aplication forms is 16th August

> Former coach Eamonn Collins and (above) the FAS/LFAI notice that appeared in local newspapers

was scouted and signed by Nottingham Forest in 1990.

Female footballers began to be recruited on to FÁS soccer courses in the early 1990s, but the Leixlip initiative was the first designed exclusively for young women and teenage girls to help develop a new generation of female footballers and coaches.

The head coach on the course for 20 women was Eamonn Collins, a Dubliner who drew comparisons with George Best from the media when he burst on to the professional football scene for Blackpool in England. Making his debut, aged just 14, in a cup game, Col lins became the youngest professional footballer to appear in a competitive match in England in April 1980. It is a record that still stands.

Although his career never came close to hitting the heights of Best, Collins was deemed "a superstar" by many of the young women starting the Leixlin course under him in September 1996. For some of them, however, what they experienced still haunts them 28 years later.

Continued on page 20

# **FIELD OF BROKEN DREAMS**

# 'Iremember thinking, that's the last time you everf\*\*kingtouchme'

# **Continued from page 19**

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# LYNN WINTERS

One of the young women who initially idolised Collins was Lynn Winters, an 18-year-old who had just sat her Leaving Certificate in Trim when she saw adverts for the Leixlip course.

Winters "hated school", but when a teacher started a girls' team, it gave her something to keep coming back for. The Meath woman came from a sporting family of eight. All of her football boots were hand-me-downs until her performances as a centre-back for Trim Celtic got her a call-up to an Ireland un-

der-16s trial. That prompted her parents to splash out on new boots. She made the under-16s team - and saw the Leixlip course as a chance to

develop as a player who could make the senior Irish squad, or earn herself a football scholarship to an American university Winters describes the course as "full-

on". She found it enjoyable at first, but by the end it "just wasn't a nice place to be" Although at 18 she was younger than other trainees, Collins made Winters

the captain of the FÁS course team that played regular challenge matches. "I would've kind of looked up to him because he would've told us stories about being the youngest ever player to go across to England and I thought this was a big thing," she says. "Yeah, I would've thought he was a superstar."

Collins did some coaching with Mick Cooke and the senior Irish women's team. A number of international players told this investigation that Collins was a knowledgeable coach and they found his drills and coaching more professional than Cooke's. The Leixlip attendees hoped that by impressing Collins they could earn a call-up to the senior side. or he could use his connections to open doors at top English clubs like Arsenal. Cooke was an occasional visitor to Leix-

lip to watch training "At the start, it was like, things that you were doing wrong, he'd point out and he'd show you the proper way to do it. But towards the end, he just turned into a bully," Winters says about Collins. Although trusted with the captaincy, Winters felt Collins made a point of belittling her in front of her teammates.

Then he was full of encouragement and praise in private. There was a lively social aspect to the course, much of it revolving around alcohol. The girls went drinking together in the Hitching Post pub near the Leixlip amenity centre where they trained.

This was the destination most Thursday evenings as that was pay day. There was one female coach working on the FAS course with Collins. Siobhan Furlong, a former senior internation-

al, and one other male coach, Brendan Place, who was still playing League of Ireland football. While Furlong rarely joined the girls in the Hitching Post, Collins regularly

went drinking with them, and Place was there occasionally, trainees say. Lorraine Maher, a goalkeeper from Waterford, remembers what Collins was

like when he socialised with the trainees. "We got paid on Thursday and we'd go down to the Hitching Post and as a team and Eamonn would always be there and we would drink a lot. "And he'd have people sitting in his

lap and yeah, promising people this when he is full of beer. And you'll be playing for Arsenal, you'd be playing for blah, blah, blah."

Winters says: "He was too familiar with us after a while. It was like, 'I'm the coach on the Monday, tonight I'm vour friend," says Winters of her rela tionship with Collins, who turned 31 a month after the course began. She was determined to impress her coach.

"I wanted to be his number one," she savs. "Like, I wanted to be his captain I wanted to do well, I wanted to be on the Irish team. So I went everywhere.' Weeks after the course started, Winters

started going on "dates" with Collins. "My feeling was, if I don't go along with this, if I don't go into the city cen tre to meet him, if I don't go drinking if I don't meet him in the car, he's no going to have me as captain any more,' she says. "It's just like the hold that he had over you - and that he could take it from you in the blink of an eve. He had final say at the end of day."

Winters says Collins collected her in his car from near her digs in Leixlip and brought her into Dublin city centre, or she got the 66 bus into Dublin and met him there She says Collins was "always prom-

sing" how he could help get her into the Irish team. The dates included trips to the cine-

ma, where she says Collins would "have s hands all over me. It was just nasty". 'The only thing that I can say is that nere was never, I never allowed myself o be in a situation where he had full control of me," she says. "There was lots f inappropriate touch. It's just control. metimes I think he still has it." Asked if there was intimacy, Winters says there was, but she never had sex-

ual intercourse with him. She says this was something Collins clearly wanted. "He would put his hand down my shorts or touch my breasts or in passing, making a joke out of it," she says. "I

touched his penis and kissed him and .. Yeah. that was it." Asked if she wanted to do those things, Winters is categorical in her response. "God, no," she says. "No. I was gay."

She felt she could not reject Collins's advances "I wasn't that strong," she says. "I never did say 'No', as in I allowed him

to touch me. I never not touched him. I suppose now, looking back, it's like he's my manager. Will he not have me being a captain? Will I not get my game if I say no? So. I just went with it? Winters was one of two girls on the course who Collins took issue with over

their weight. He made them wear black ags under their clothes as they trained. Collins said it would help them sweat off excess fat. Winters found it "humiliating". She

vividly remembers the noises made from having to run while wearing the black bags and the pain of the friction burns on her skin.

From being elated and proud to be appointed captain of the team, her confidence collapsed over the term of the course

As the course came to an end, Winters attended testimonial matches arranged for Siobhan Furlong in Waterford on May 24, 1997 The games included a local women's

team playing against a national side. That match was followed by a men's game, where a Waterford selection played a "national celebrity" team that included Collins, Place, Cooke and former Irish internationals John Aldridge and Liam O'Brien.

The most decorated player th was Alan Ball, the England World Cup winner and former Everton and Southampton midfielder who had been a mentor to Collins since his Blackpool days. At a function after the game, Winters

remembers Collins calling her over to his table, where he sat beside Ball. Collins, she says, "put his hands up between my legs and practically pinched

my crotch "I remember just freezing... I stood hrough the conversation and I remember thinking, that's the last time you'll ever f\*\*king touch me. And it was." Winters says Ball had "no clue" what Collins had done to her while he was

sitting beside him. After the course, Winters went on a soccer scholarship to Edinboro University in Pennsylvania thanks to Collins and Cooke's contacts. However, her love for the sport had by then evaporated.

"I didn't even want to play, I'd no love for the game any more," she says. I just fell out of love with football. I just wanted to go home." Until approached by this investiga-

tion, she had never told her family or friends about what happened to her on the course. She was shocked to discover she was not the only trainee to say Collins had made sexual advances on them. "I thought I was the only one and that

he preferred me out of everybody," she says. "Like looking back on it, when I ecently] heard about others, it's like ... literally thought I was the only one.

I had no clue. Winters works with vulnerable mi-

a mother, she says she concluded many years ago that what happened between her and her coach was wrong. "He ruined my life," she says. "I know

it's not my fault, but if it'll stop him in future, I'll do what I can. He no longer controls me or what goes on in my life. "I'm angry at myself for not talking earlier. I'm angry at myself for not looking for supports, but I'm also proud of myself that I have come to tell my story."

# BRIDGET McDONALD

Although she was one of the oldest participants on the Leixlip course, Bridget McDonald, then aged 21, was also one of the smallest. She may have been the shvest one there, too,

From Wexford, she worked odd jobs like waitressing in Enniscorthy after leaving school. But the football pitch was where she felt most comfortable.

"I felt good about myself when I was playing," she says. "It was just natural. When I was younger, I would be allowed play with the boys. Yeah, it was just something I was good at." She captained the Enniscorthy United women's team in her late teens. Al-

though petite in stature. she says that never hindered her, even when playing against boys "I think people got a bit of a surprise

when I had the ball," she says. "I loved it. Loved it. Especially when I was able to beat them.' She had never travelled away from

Wexford and was a "nervous wreck" travelling to Leixlip in 1996. She had been pushed into applying by her friend and was delighted when she was accepted. News that she had gained a place on the course garnered coverage in her local newspaper

"Soccer fame beckons for Bridget" was the headline over an article about a "revolution" in Irish soccer.



# There were times whenIwanteditall to end. And I tried, a couple of times

A gay woman who had a girlfriend in Wexford, McDonald soon made friends with the other trainees and was immediately in awe of the coaches, especially Eamonn Collins.

"I found out about his professional career, and when I saw him with a football, I was like, 'Oh my God," she says. Waking up every morning to play football with the best young girls in the country was a "dream come true". Impressed by Collins, McDonald recalls him "playing pool and telling his stories from his career" on Thursday nights

with the trainees in the Hitching Post. But she went from loving the course to not wanting to be there after the events of one weekend.

She would normally get a bus each Friday from Leixlip into Dublin, where she could take a coach home to Enniscorthy for the weekend. One Friday. McDonald and two other girls from the course bumped into Collins on their way into Dublin. Trisha Bourke, one of the trainees who was travelling home to Tipperary by train, remembers Collins getting the bus from Leixlip in to the city with the three trainees and says they decided to have some drinks in a pub near Heuston Station.

When the other two girls got their trains home after a few drinks, McDonald staved with Collins. They went to

chair Nia

O'Donogh



nors in a residential care setting. Now McDonald remembers people in the pub looking at them. She believes they may have kissed

They ended up back in Collins's apartment. McDonald does not remember how they got there, but recalls music playing. She remembers they had sexual intercourse. She also recalls Collins becoming concerned that she could be pregnant. She says he repeatedly

warned her about this "I'd never been with a man, I'm gay and I hadn't really got a clue. I was real naive" McDonald says

She called a friend from a landline, a young garda living in Dublin who she asked to collect her, although she was unable to tell her what the address was. The friend, who is still a garda, has

confirmed she remembers getting the call. She says she rang Brendan Place Collins's assistant, to get his address. With the garda's housemate driving they drove to collect McDonald from Collins's apartment.

This investigation contacted the garda's housemate from that time. He said he sometimes gave his housemate a lift, but did not remember the trip to collect Bridget McDonald. Before leaving, McDonald says Collins

gave her IR£20. Asked why she thinks he did this, she replies: "I dunno." Her friend brought her to the Well

Woman Centre in Liffey Street the following morning. She was referred to a doctor in Stillorgan, who gave her a prescription for the morning-after pill. She then got a bus back home to Wexford. Her girlfriend at the time remembers that weekend because she was worried when McDonald did not come home as normal on Friday When McDonald arrived on the Satur day, she told her girlfriend about the sexual encounter with her coach. She felt guilty over it.

Before leaving Collins on the Friday, McDonald says, he had told her she could take the following Monday off. She has a vague recollection of him calling her into a portable cabin when she came back the following week to see if she was "OK", and her replying that she was "grand'

Inside, however, McDonald was in turmoil, racked by guilt and shame over what had happened. Trisha Bourke, her friend from Tip-

perary, remembers McDonald telling her later that week what had happened with Collins. "She was still in shock," says Bourke.

'She was numb, she was upset. She was blaming herself. She had been a virgin. She wasn't into men, so it completely, completely threw her altogether. Like, she didn't know what to do, what to say

or who to say anything to." Bourke says a change came over Mc-Donald. "She kind of drew into herself a bit and then she started to drink more." she says. "But he [Collins] acted as if nothing had happened.

McDonald says nothing else happened between her and Collins, but that night had a profound effect on her. "It just ruined everything," she says. "I've always had low self-esteem, no

confidence, I hated myself, all that kind of stuff. And soccer was the only thing that I was good at. To me it was the only thing I had, and after that it just destroyed me.' The drunken encounter with Collins

was the first and only time she had sexual intercourse with a man.

"I blamed myself for everything, so I just thought it's obviously me, you know? They see something in me. So I didn't talk about it. I would've started drinking heavily after that and I struggled for years with addiction." After the course finished in the sum

mer of 1997, her drinking "went off the rails". There were "no more thoughts of making it in soccer"

"I was in my first AA meeting within a year of leaving the course, a yearand-a-half, maybe," she says. "And I've struggled with that for years. I've been in three rehabs and I don't know if I have ever spoken about that [night]. Because I blame myself."

McDonald is now in recovery thanks to her wife Jennifer's love and help. She told Jennifer about what happened with Collins soon after they met.

"There were times that I wanted it all to end," she says. "It got that bad. And I tried, a couple of times."

Since first meeting with the investigation team in 2023, McDonald has learned that a number of other women on the course have their own stories about Collins. This realisation and the sharing of their stories has had some healing effects.

"It's eased the blame a bit," McDonald says. "A tiny bit. But it helps talking to some of the other girls. It's sickening, and the fact that nobody else knew. So everybody had their own horror going on and nobody knew.'

The women from year one of the Leixp course have arranged a number of meetings in Naas.

"It was emotional seeing them again," McDonald says. "I never thought in a million years that I could sit down and



talk about this. And if Mam was still with us, I don't think I would have." Her mother Joan died in 2021. Although McDonald said she is "not into robins

and butterflies" as heralding messages from beyond, just before she spoke to this investigation she noticed a butterfly on a window of her brother's house. In that moment, she was preparing to tell her brother, for the first time, about her experience in Leixlip

"Then, when I started telling him about what was going on, the butterfly flew over and landed on my arm," she savs. "I looked at John and he looked at me and I was just, 'Oh my God'. And he iust welled up and I welled up and I was like, 'OK, they're looking', you know?" Knowing now that there were more girls who Collins allegedly made sexual advances on during the course has made her re-evaluate the guilt she has

over that Friday night. "Maybe it's not all my fault," she says. "I definitely feel since we all started talking I can feel myself getting a bit stronger. Jen has noticed it with me. And, yeah, 'empowered' I think is the word.



TRISHA BOURKE From Newport, Co Tipperary, Bourke

was 13 when she began playing senior women's football in the Limerick league. She applied for the Leixlip course after seeing a newspaper advert when waiting to be served in her local chipper. Unlike other players, she was not too impressed with Eamonn Collins

girls on their weekly social nights out as a coach. "He could be nice one minute and there was no "big deal" made of it. the next minute he could just turn and he'd be roaring and screaming for like wrong for young girls to be out drink 10 minutes and then he'd be like as if ing until all hours of the night and their nothing happened," Bourke says. coaches with them," she says.

Once Collins realised most of the girls were regularly going to the Hitching Post pub on Thursdays, he would encourage them all to go.

Bourke says Collins made comments baded with sexual innuendo towards her. Her 21st birthday card was signed by all her fellow players, some with bawdy messages. Under Collins's signature he wrote: "Shame you didn't score today, but I'm sure you will tonight".

"He'd often ask questions about boyfriends and stuff like that," Bourke savs. "And did I get sex when I went home the weekends, and whatever. I'd ust laugh it off and tell him like, you know, maybe I did, maybe I didn't. My life was only his business while I was there from nine to five." Bourke believes Collins was testing the

girls to see who might be approachable. "I think he was trying to suss out what girls to go for," she says. "What girls were willingly able to stand up for themselves and wouldn't take any shit off him?

She experienced her own unwelcome advance from Collins after Christmas "ended up doing it himself".

original accommodation into a house where Collins was temporarily staying. She says Collins helped her move her things into the house. As they watched TV together, she remembers telling him that she was going off to bed. "I like my sleep," she says. Collins suggested that they both go to her room, Bourke says. She rejected this instantly, but Collins then proposed

that he could "come in and keep you

"And I'm like, 'No, you're grand.

Collins asked again if he could join

"He was looking for sex. It's obvious

Bourke's overriding feeling is that the

I didn't want him anywhere near me.

So I just told him, 'No, no', that was it.

course let the girls down. None of the

women knew who they could approach

to complain about Collins. Given what

she has learned since meeting the oth-

er trainees again, Bourke believes the

fact that Collins ran the FAS course

for women for two years after she left

Adele was one of the local girls from

Leixlip on the course. She was able to

live at home while attending. She has

asked that her full identity not be re-

"My first impressions were, 'This is

going to be tough," she says. "But I en-

joyed it. The set-up was good. All of our

gear was provided." She turned 18 after

the first month. "I was young, fresh, I

She saw coaching as a route she could

go down, and her initial impressions of

Collins and Brendan Place were that

they were good coaches. She says that

when they started accompanying the

"Now that I'm older, it's completely

Adele says Collins made the girls feel

She had a traumatic experience at

the hands of Collins one day in the

Leixlip Amenity Centre during train-

ing. She is unsure of when during the

course it happened. Collins asked her

to stay behind to gather up training

gear in the changing room after the

other girls had gone out to the pitch

es. As she was doing so, Adele recalls

him coming back into the room when

back in," she says. "I thought he'd gone

out to the pitches with everybody els

to kiss me and before I knew it, I was

pinned up against the shower wall and

he was kissing me. He took my hand

and he put it down his trousers and

he was wanting me to please him and

obviously I wasn't doing the correct

She says she "froze stiff" and Collins

He walked towards me and he started

"I wasn't even expecting him to come

evervone else had left.

iob. or whatever.

that if they impressed him they would

have a better chance of "getting some-

where" in the football world.

vealed to protect her family.

had good skills," she says.

her and told her that "no one has to

Honestly. I'd prefer stay on my owr

thanks," Bourke says.

know", she says.

I went to bed."

s "scandalous".

ADELE

Sunday Independent 7 July 2024

# FIELD OF BROKEN DREAMS

"I thought it was a very successful course," she says. "I had a few questions, but generally, no, I just thought I had no reason to question anything." She remembers Collins as someone

who could get "very aggressive". "He'd have a short fuse, and if you pressed the wrong buttons, basically you'll see the anger in his face," she says.

It was only after the course ended that Furlong realised issues had arisen with the girls that she had been oblivious of. In June 1997, she got a job coaching a kids' camp in Drumcondra and asked two Leixlip graduates to work with her. As they were having a few drinks in the evening, reminiscing about the course, one of the Leixlip graduates told Furlong about concerns she had about Collins's conduct with one of her friends on the course.

I didn't suspect anything," Furlong says. 'I needed to tell the FAI."

Furlong says she decided to pass on an allegation that Collins had a sexual encounter with a trainee to Niamh O'Donoghue, the chair of the LFAI. She believes that within a week of hearing the allegation, she met O'Donoghue at a hotel in Carlow.

of what information and which trainees were mentioned do not match. O'Donoghue says Furlong approached her with complaints about Collins and says allegations of sexual advances on two trainees were made.

at night, knowing she had passed her she received a call from Collins. They had hugged when the Leixlip course had they had to meet

Clockwise from above, Eamonn

Collins; Brendan Place; Collins,

left, and Place with the FÁS

Leixlip course team, including

McDonald, front, in Westport

Lorraine Maher, back, and Bridget

O'NEILLS

"And we knew each other for many,

many years. So again, all these girls

were at an age where they were actu-

ally mature. They were able to have a

Place said dating trainees on the

"I was a single man," he said. "I was

relationship. I don't deny that either.'

course over two years never affected

actually divorced at the time. I'd two

voung children. In fact, you know, I

didn't feel I was doing anything wrong

Place said he had no knowledge of

"I had no awareness that he mis-

treated any girls," he said. "Eamonn

was very helpful to them, as far as I

Place insisted that the LFAI, FAI and

FÁS never gave any guidelines or rules

SIOBHAN FURLONG

"It was a nice bunch of girls," Fur-

long says. "It was a nice mix of talent

She says she could see which players

were likely to have football careers and

those who could build their experience

and skills. She thought the scheme was

a "fantastic idea". It was something she

would have loved to have had as a teen-

ager. She had done her own FÁS course

in the early 1990s and saw how intim-

of women to have to train with a large

that were held every Thursday in Leix-

lip, generally in the Hitching Post. but

assistant in a school, she says she al-

ers" between coaches or teachers and

She questioned Collins about why he

would regularly socialise with the girls

on the course. She thought the three

coaches – Furlong, Collins and Place

could do their own thing.

idating it could be for a small number

Furlong was aware of the "sessions"

1996-1997

and humour."

group of young men.

the students.

ppropriately with

his job as a coach.

any trainee.

can remember.

o say. She told Collins she would meet him in the car park of the Laurels pub in Clondalkin

"I got into the car, into his car, sat in the passenger seat," she recalls tearful-"And he said to me, he said, 'What are these f\*\*king lies you're telling about me?"

Furlong replied that all she had done vas "transfer information that I got from Furlong says she kept a calm demeana million miles a minute".

"I was kind of giddy," she says. "I was kind of not believing what had happened.

She told a former international teammate about meeting Collins. The teammate has confirmed she remembers Furlong being shaken from the

Furlong went home to Waterford. where her mother told her she had done the right thing in passing information she had to the football authorities.

"I was a hundred per cent, a million per cent happy that they would deal with it," Furlong says. She was busy coaching Limerick in

1998 and travelled to America in 1999. She planned to go to Australia in 2000 o work at the Sydney Olympics. Before she left, she ran into Milo Corcoran, the vice-president of the FAI, at a Waterford that said having a relationship with match. She decided to tell Corcoran about what happened with Collins. She says Corcoran asked to meet her and recorded her story on a Dictaphone in the Tower Hotel

> "He was horrified," Furlong says. Corcoran, who was FAI president tween 2001 and 2005, died in 2016. His family said they have kept none of is FAI records.

On her return from Australia in No-He told her the FAI "had decided not

FAI board members from that time, and none recalled Corcoran ever raising the issue at board level.

utive from 1996 to 2001, says neither

former trainees. "I had to do it for them. And now,

they need to," she says.

privately

late 1990s

coach on the course.

matter at the time."

issues of concern.

surprise to her.

op the game."

#### NIAMH O'DONOGHUE LFAI CHAIR, 1989–2016

"I was obviously in total shock because

Furlong and O'Donoghue's memories

Furlong says she felt she could sleep information to the LFAI. Within a week, finished weeks earlier, but Collins was now aggressive, she says. He insisted

Furlong wanted to hear what he had

When she asked what he meant.

Furlong says Collins replied: "You're spreading f\*\*king lies about me."

the girls on the course to the FAI". This prompted a furious response from Collins, she says. She remembers his face turning red as he shouted insults at her our, even though her heart was "beating

She then left the car.

This man that I'd spent nine months with as a friend ... He was a buddy of mine, and all this is happening."

confrontation

vember 2000, Furlong rang Corcoran. to do anything about it".

This investigation has spoken to three

Bernard O'Byrne, the FAI chief exec-



**RTÉ INVESTIGATES GIRLS IN GREEN** 

WATCH THE RTÉ INVESTIGATES DOCUMENTARY, GIRLS IN GREEN, TONIGHT AT 9.30PM ON RTÉI AND RTÉ PLAYER

PLUS: Mark Tighe and Marie Crowe are interviewed by Ellen Coyne about how they pursued their two-year investigation for an Indo Daily two-part podcast, with Episode One released tomorrow morning and Episode Two available on Tuesday





"He pulled up his pants and hit the shower button and told me to clean up the mess and walked out of the changing room," she says.

This investigation put these allega tions to Collins. A statement released through his solicitor said: "Eamonn Collins emphatically and unreservedly denies any improper relationship or conduct."

Over 25 years after this alleged incident, Adele says thinking about it makes her feel sick.

"I was very angry," she says. "I still eel sick to this day. I feel annoved. I feel let down. I feel I no longer trust anybody. I never did. Yeah, it's been very, very tough." She remembers thinking at the time:

"What the hell has just happened?" "But you were made to feel like you were kind of the lucky one, that the coach kind of had picked you, that he liked you, he fancied you. Yeah, it's

vile," she says Adele says she did not feel she could tell anyone what happened. "I thought it was my fault," she says

"I was the one that was in the wrong." did something wrong. She never told any of her friends on the course. In fact, she never spoke about it at all until she was approached by this investigation and quickly guessed what the call was about. Collins had been on her mind during the Covid lockdowns, she says. She had googled him and harboured thoughts about confronting him. Memories of him had resurfaced" during the pandemic and

"hit me like a ton of bricks" She was blown away to discover she was not the only one in her course that

Collins made sexual advances on. "I couldn't believe it," she says. "I burst into tears. I felt sick. I couldn't believe it. I just couldn't believe that it wasn't just me."

She says the effect of her encounter with Collins had a "massive" impact on her life: "I couldn't cope with a lot of things. I don't trust anybody. I'd get angry outbursts and not know why this was happening to me and stuff like that. Every single time I thought about it I just shut it down. I would feel sick at the thought of it, and then I would just shut it down and I'd try and do my best to forget about it.

Although she had no issues with Brendan Place, Adele says she knew he was in a consensual relationship with one of her friends on the course at the time and that was "just inappropriate". "He was very respectful towards her and it didn't last very long," she says.

"But he should never have gone there with a girl of that age [18]." When the course finished in the summer of 1997, Adele's dreams of being a football coach no longer existed. She has taken solace in recent months from meeting others who had similar

experiences. "It's nice to be able to sit and talk to others because they know exactly how you feel," she says. "They know exactly the emotional side, the mental side of things. I hope to God this never ever happens to any other girl out there, ever again. But we're all strong."

She has agreed to speak out now to warn young female players to watch out for inappropriate behaviour from coaches. "If you notice any strange behaviours

in any of your coaches, male or female, act on your instinct, go with your gut. Talk to somebody.

# 'RITA'

One of the most talented girls on the first year of the Leixlip course was a player we are calling Rita.

Women who attended the course and former teammates say it was an open secret that Rita was in a relationship with Collins. They say they remember her reg- in any way shape or form." ularly appearing upset on the course, but she always had a story to explain why. Rita declined to be interviewed for

this investigation but confirmed she was in a "relationship" with Collins while she was on the course. Friends of Rita said her involvement

with Collins when she was still a teenager had life-long effects on her mental health.



# **ASSISTANT COACH**

ruary this year to ask him about allegations that women from the course have made. They say Place was in consensual relationships with two course attendees, one each in Year 1 and Year 2. Both women, who were teenagers at the time, declined to be interviewed, but confirmed they had consensual

"I go to mass every day," Place said. "My conscience is clear. Like us all, I'm a sinner. But I know the Good Lord, when I stand in front of him, he is not going to surprise me with anything about everything I did. And I didn't do anything wrong in the law when I was

Place confirmed he had relationships with two trainees and said there was no issue as they were above the age of

"That's no problem there," he said about the trainee on Year 1. "That was fully consensual. You can't say that was wrong. I did not do anything wrong. I treated the girl with complete respect." Asked if it was appropriate for a coach as someone who is now a special needs to have a relationship with a player,

Place said: "I thought about it from wave thought there should be "barri that regard, but I didn't see anything wrong with it." Place, who turned 31 during year

one of the course, said he was "always a gentleman". He said his relationship with the trainee from year two arose as she was his neighbour.

1996-1999 At the time when he was Collins's assis-

Place was also a player for Home Farm Everton in the League of Ireland. He had played in England with Gillingham before suffering a serious injury. Place is a fervent Christian and runs a window-fitting business.

players he coached was prohibited. "I don't believe there was anything wrong done there," he said. "It was a different era."

**BRENDAN PLACE** 

tant on the FÁS Leixlip course, Brendan

This investigation called him in Feb-

relationships with Place.

there as a coach."

consent. 17.

"I had no reason to suspect anything, but I do feel guilty and I've spoken to the girls and they have been so good to me. They've been so good and so they know I didn't know anything. They're 40 now, but they're still my kids." Furlong believes the Leixlip course could have been the start of a revolu-

tion in Irish women's football, but it was undermined by its head coach. She is determined to speak out now for the

thankfully, they're going to come forward and tell their story because I think

In June 2023. Niamh O'Donoghue was awarded a Special Merit Award at an FAI event where RTÉ journalist Marie Crowe was the MC. Shortly afterwards, Crowe arranged to meet O'Donoghue

Crowe told O'Donoghue about the Sunday Independent/RTÉ joint investigation and how it had unearthed serious allegations of inappropriate behaviour by Collins on the Leixlip course in the

O'Donoghue later agreed to answer estions in writing. In her responses, she said Furlong had gone to her with complaints about Collins making sexual advances on two players. O'Donoghue said she spoke with both girls, but they denied anything had happened.

This investigation has established that the first of those investigated was Rita. Rita has confirmed to this investigation that although she denied it to O'Donoghue at the time, she was in a relationship with Collins while on the course and still a teenager

Asked specifically about Furlong's complaint, O'Donoghue said: "My recollection is that this conversation took place in 1998, not 1997, but I cannot be certain of this. My recollection is that Siobhan indicated that two participants on the course had told her that there had been inappropriate behaviour (sexual advances) towards them by the head

"Having heard the account from Siobhan, I contacted at least one other volunteer member of the LFAI committee and discussed how we should proceed. I arranged to speak, in conidence, with both individuals named by Siobhan. One conversation was held in person, the other by phone. I took contemporaneous notes in relation to all conversations held regarding this

Asked about Collins. O'Donoghue said: "I believe I spoke to the person against whom the complaint had been made and informed him that a suggestion of inappropriate behaviour had been received. He denied this categorically." O'Donoghue said that given the two trainees categorically denied the allegations, "there was no basis for us to take any further action".

Sean Brodie, an LFAI committee member in the 1990s, said he was aware O'Donoghue had been advised of concerns about two players on the both trainees and that he accompanied her to a meeting with the second. He said both players denied there was any

"My clear recollection was there was therefore no basis to pursue this matter

further," Brodie said. In her written responses, O'Donoghue said that when she met Crowe last

vear, the allegations were a complete

"The LFAI/WFAI committee were all volunteers operating in an amateur environment - facing significant finan cial, logistical and other challenges," she said. "Support from the governing body, although gradually increasing, was minimal by today's standards.

"There is no doubt that the culture in the 1990s was very different to what it is today. There was a very 'macho' culture within the game and dismissive.

occasionally hostile, attitudes towards the idea of women playing football or being engaged in its governance were pervasive. This was the context in which hose of us involved in various leagues and the LFAI tried to grow and devel-

With the introduction of under-age teams in the mid-1990s, O'Donoghue said the LFAI put in measures that were 'significantly ahead of any requirements

"We were proud of what we put in place and were given no reason to see that there were any shortcomings in this regard," she said. "The members of the committee repeatedly advised



players, both adult and under-age, that if they were concerned about any issues, they should speak to one of the LFAI committee

"As a volunteer who dedicated time over many, many years to the development of women's football in Ireland I have been shocked and upset at the emergence of these allegations.

"I did not know anything about them and am extremely saddened that those who allegedly were aware of any wrongdoing did not, or felt they could not bring it to my attention or the attention of anyone else on the LFAI/WFAI committee. I am also completely saddened at the idea that any player would have to endure such appalling behaviour. O'Donoghue said she believed the

recruitment of the Leixlip coaches was done by FAS, and there was no day-to day management of the course by the LFAI. She said the LFAI had nothing to do with the final year of the course from 1998 to 1999.

O'Donoghue said it was her reco lection that the LFAI involvement in the Leixlip course finished "soon" af ter Furlong raised her concerns about Collins, which she believes may have been in 1998.

The course ran until 1999, and there was no female coach involved after Fur long left in 1997.

O'Donoghue said she believes she briefed three people about the allegations: the FÁS course supervisor; Mick Cooke, the head coach of the interna tional team: and the chairman of the FAI International Committee.

The retired FÁS supervisor for north Kildare at the time said no such allegation was ever passed to him. Cooke also denies being briefed on this.

O'Donoghue said she has not retained any of her records from that time. She has transferred all her football records to the FAL

Asked about Brendan Place's comment that there were no rules given to coaches forbidding them from having relationships with trainees, O'Donoghu said the coaches "would have been expected to act in a manner appropriate to a trainer for any FÁS training course" She said she was "certain" that in the

late 1990s "any relationship between a coach and a player would not be deemed acceptable or appropriate". She said the LFAI policy was to "advis

any coach involved with any LFAI team on the need for appropriate behaviour particularly given the involvement of male coaches in coaching female teams "This was a FÁS training course and regular oversight would have been undertaken by FÁS supervisors in accordance with whatever terms and conditions applied at that time," she said.

#### SOLAS/FAS

FÁS, the state employment training body, was dissolved as an entity in 2013 following a series of corporate governance failures. Many of its function were absorbed into a new body, Solas It said it has retained no records of the Leixlip LFAI course. Solas said it was aware the course was a Local Training Initiative funded by FÁS through a lo course. He said O'Donoghue spoke to cal community group, which it believes was the LFAL

> It said FÁS funding w provided on the basis that the community group (the LFAI) would be responsible for ensuring the course would "adhere to operating standards which would include safeguarding measures for all participants". It said any trainee with concerns about a course can contact their local Education and Training Board. It could not say which training board the former Leixlip trainees should contact.

#### EAMONN COLLINS COACH. 1996-1999

Eamonn Collins now works as an agent who was licensed by both the FAI and the FA in England. His best-known client is his nephew, Nathan Collins, the Ireland and Brentford defender, who has been involved in two €20m-plus transfers since July 2022.

After FAI officials met a group of the women from Year 1 of the Leixlip course earlier this year, the FAI issued "stand down" orders on March 15 to Collins and Place under its safeguarding rules These FAI orders prohibit the men from any involvement in Irish football while the FAI carries out its own investigations.

In a written statement issued by his solicitors. Collins said he "emphatically and unreservedly denies any improper relationship or conduct by him while he was involved as a coach on a football training course in west Co Dublin that commenced in 1996, which is more than 25 years ago"

It continued: "Mr Collins has been nvolved actively in football as a player coach and agent over 40 years. He has never been the subject of any investigation or allegation of improper conduct. He has taken legal advice in relation to the defamatory comments made and will take such steps as are necessary to protect his reputation. Some of the comments and statements made are false, untrue, malicious and damaging to Mr Collins."

The statement said Collins will not make any further public comments and the matter will be dealt with by his solicitors.

The FAI has asked that anuone who experienced harm or abuse from Irish football to contact the independent contractor it has hired to take statements. Raiseaconcern's contact numbers are 01 6107929 or 086 0299929. It can be emailed on football@raiseaconcern.com

Anyone who wishes to contact the team behind the joint investigation with information can contact mark.tighe@independent.ie / marie.crowe@rte.ie