



TOLKA PARK:

A HISTORY – PART I

The following article, written by David Wynne,
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Just along from Drumcondra Bridge, on a bend in the river where today the faded facade of a football stadium remains, there was once a residence called Trout Lodge. The name evokes a time when the river flowed fast and was more abundant with life.

Soon the bulldozers will come for the stands and terraces, what life remains within condemned to history. The record of a stadium on maps will, for future generations, be a curiosity, providing a hint of almost a century of sport and entertainment enjoyed there.

Its story begins with the founding of Drumcondra FC in 1924, though there had previously been other Drumcondra teams which had disbanded. The location carries echoes of some of the earliest football in Ireland. In the late 19th century, Larry Sheridan was among those who formed the Drumcondra-Botanic club at a meeting on the waterfront where the Riverside stand rises today. He would go on to become an influential figure in the Leinster Football association and the FAI.

There would follow another incarnation of Drumcondra in the early part of the 20th century. The Richmond Road itself was something of a hotbed for football, with several teams already based out of the many playing fields there, including Frankfort who were founding members of the League of Ireland in 1921.

Despite the failures of previous such clubs, the founders of Drumcondra; Tom Cribben, Tom Johnston, George Ollis, Christy Purcell and Andy Quinn, were hugely ambitious for their side. They identified a patch of land, close to the Drumcondra tram stop as ideal for their club's new home. They would be far from the last men with grand dreams to be seduced

by this location. The grounds would become known as Tolka Park, though it would be as late as 1926 before this moniker was commonplace in newspaper reports.

Tolka's fortunes were closely intertwined with the successes and failures of the clubs who came to call it home through the years. Drumcondra, though a newly formed side, were immediately accepted into the Leinster Senior League Division 1. They would finish runners-up in their inaugural season and repeat this placing the following year. It seemed Drums were in prime position to be admitted to the League of Ireland's Free State League and applied at the first opportunity, when the retirement of Pioneers created a vacancy in 1926.

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By this time Tolka Park already had a pavilion and, in preparation for top tier football, an enclosure was added around this. The pitch was levelled by steamroller and embankments created for spectators where possible. Their efforts were in vain as instead, Dundalk were elected to the League of Ireland. Undeterred, within months of this rejection further improvements were made. These included the addition of hot and cold baths to the pavilion and the press noted the club's efforts

in looking after both spectators and players. It was around this time that the first advertisements for games at the venue – with admission prices of 1s & 6d – appear in the evening newspapers.

In 1927, success in winning the Free State Cup (the forerunner of the FAI Cup) as a “second grade” side and Leinster Cup pressed their case further. En route to a second cup final in succession in 1928, a record crowd of approximately 10,000 passed through the turnstiles for a game against Bray Unknowns. Though they would lose the final against Bohemians, Drumcondra's claim to a place at the top table could no longer be ignored. In June 1928, they were duly elected to the Free State League and on August 26th of that year a large crowd witnessed a 1-1 draw between Drumcondra and Shamrock Rovers in Tolka's first League of Ireland match.

The rising popularity of the venue was evident with a letter to the Evening Herald in the name of “Safety First” noting the need for upgrades to the footpath along the football ground side of the Richmond Road due to the increasing traffic.

Up to this point the top games in Dublin had been the preserve of Shelbourne Park and Dalymount Park. Important matches like the Free State Cup semi-finals had been always been fixed for these venues as they were the only grounds with adequate capacity. However, early in 1929, a dispute arose between the clubs and the FAI about gate receipts. Shelbourne and Bohemians asked for 10% of the gate, but the association were only prepared to offer 7.5%. With neither side prepared to back down, the decision was taken to move the game between Dundalk and Shamrock Rovers to Tolka Park barely 48 hours before kick-off.

The late change of venue was problematic enough, but just a week earlier 13 spectators had been injured at Tolka Park. Wire fencing at one end of the ground collapsed, unable to support the weight of the 100 or so youths using it as vantage point to watch a game against Shelbourne which was already above capacity. Tolka's capacity at this time was estimated at 10,000 – 12,000, less than half of the Ringsend and Phibsboro venues and considered far too small for the anticipated turnout, with the lack of a covered stand being a further drawback. For the semi-final itself, many stayed away due to the fear of overcrowding and a boycott by members of Bohemians and Shelbourne. This resulted in reducing takings at the gate of just £300, far less than the £1600 the previous year's final had generated.

It was clear that, despite the rapid improvements, further development would be needed to meet the growing attraction of football at Drumcondra's home and to establish the ground as an equal of other Dublin venues. The challenge of such growth in its residential location was spelled out in yet another letter to the Evening Herald, lamenting the difficulties caused to locals by badly parked vehicles, inadequate policing, and spectators trying to gain access without paying via gardens. A first step was taken later in 1929, with the formation of a new public company; Drumcondra Football Club. This allowed the club to take on the debt necessary to upgrade the grounds and create a more professional setup.

The 1931-32 season was pivotal in laying the foundations for football as enjoyed in Tolka Park today.

Drumcondra were among the first to experiment with Friday evening games in the early part of the season, while daylight allowed. It was certainly a change from afternoon games during the Winter in the 1920s which had to be shortened to 30 minutes a half due to bad light. The late summer evening exhibition games were reported to be popular with spectators and generated large attendances and profits which would be crucial for the largest building project at the ground yet.

In January 1932 excavations began on the river side of the ground. A covered stand was finally built. Like Noah's Ark, it's dimensions are faithfully recorded. The Irish Independent reported it would measure 160 feet long and 46 ft. 6 in. wide, with a covered frontage of 14ft. The estimated capacity of the stand was 5,000 but within a few years, it was reported that it held as many as 8,000. The pitch was also widened by 5 yards with plans to further lengthen it also.

The record attendance swelled first to 16,000. Then in 1935, with additional terracing in the Riverside stand and Richmond Road enclosure, and as many as 12 turnstiles in operation helped create a new record attendance of 18,000 for a cup semi-final, where despite the new facilities, numbers behind each of the goals were so great that the fencing was broken by the volume of the crowd. Photos from this era show a stand that is as recognisable to anyone who has seen the league's newest sides like Cabinteely or Wexford Youths at Tolka as it would be to those who witnessed that semi-final between Drumcondra and Dolphin.

It wasn't just football that drew crowds to Tolka Park. Almost from its earliest days it has been what is described in modern parlance as a multi-purpose arena.

From 1929 it was a boxing venue with open air bouts fought every few years. In 1934 it hosted a contest for the national lightweight title. Probably the earliest footage of the ground is of the respected American heavyweight Tony Shucco defeating the great Irish hope Dom Lydon in 1938. For most of the next decade a boxing card would be a fixture of the summer, with the Drumcondra chairman even acting as promoter and the football club itself putting up the purse.

The most notorious fight at the Drumcondra venue during this era did not take place within the boxing ring. In March 1942, a "riot" broke out between two rival gangs, swiftly dubbed by newspapers as the "Battle of Tolka Park". It happened during the semi-final of the Junior Combination Cup between St. Stephen's and Mountview. The teams and Football Association were keen to point out the violence was not related to football. Nevertheless, the events that took place that day are extraordinary enough as to be worth retelling even now.

The two gangs involved were the "Ash Street Gang" and the "Stafford Street Gang". It was suggested in court that if the clash was not pre-arranged it was certainly expected, with weapons drawn on both sides. The Ash Street Gang had arrived at the match and reportedly entered without any of them paying admission. The Stafford Street Gang commandeered a flotilla of boats and rowed up the Tolka, mooring the boats near the Ballybough end. After fording the river, they scaled the boundary partition and attacked their rivals.

Players and spectators quickly fled and later witnesses described seeing knives, swords, crowbars and bayonets, as well as corner flags and bricks being adapted for combat. One participant

was being treated for head injuries in the pavilion when two men climbed through a window to finish him off, only being prevented from doing so by some of the players who were attending to him. Another antagonist was rescued after being thrown over the wall into the river. Unsurprisingly the match was quickly abandoned, but the clash continued and spilled on to the road outside. Ultimately ten young men were arrested and tried. Nine of them were found guilty and given sentences of between 6 and 18 months.

The entertainment on offer at Tolka Park went beyond sports, marking it as a venue of wider cultural importance for Dublin. In 1931, a programme of music and dance took place there as part of Wolfe Tone Week. A charity fête in 1933 featured such diverse events as a story-telling contest and a fairy cycle race. Long before floodlights arrived, there were illuminations of a different sort during the Tolka Park Carnival in 1937. Attractions included Dodgems, a Ghost Train and Donkey Rides. You could also have your palm read or take a motorboat ride on the river. Music and dance were catered for with acts such as Charlie Nutty's A1 Combination playing the "Big Ballroom" and a ceilidh in the hall that had both been specially set up for the occasion.

Even animals graced its hallowed turf. As part of that 1937 carnival the "All Sorts of Dogs Show" took place, awarding prizes to the "Dog That Can Wag Tail Fastest" and "Nicest White Dog". Dog shows continued to grow in popularity throughout the forties and by the middle of the decade a record 925 entries competed in the Combined Canine Club's contest at Tolka Park. The Jeserich circus brought with it Horses, Bears and Lions while Reco Bros featured

crocodiles and pythons.

These events were as practical as they were entertaining, ensuring the grounds were in continuous use, even outside the football season. The Hunter family, who owned the club at this time, were successful contractors, providing many Drumcondra players with employment, but the economic reality of 1930s Ireland followed by the lack of resources during the years of the second world war made further development of the ground fitful and incremental. The completion of terracing for the Riverside stand by 1938 meant that the focus was now on erecting the 'reserved' stand on the Richmond Road side, but an application to the FAI for a loan to complete these works in 1939 and again in 1940 was rejected on the grounds of "the precarious state of football today."

By the end of the 1940s the Hunters had succeeded in developing the stadium to be one of the premier venues in Dublin and finally achieved the club's dream of winning the League of Ireland, bringing the trophy home to Tolka for the first time in 1947/48 and retaining their title in 1948/49. Success on the pitch made the club an attractive proposition and the stage was now set for the next great era in Tolka's history.



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