



TOLKA PARK:

A HISTORY – PART II

The following article, written by David Wynne, originally appeared in Shelbourne fanzine, Red Inc. - Issue 67, in September of 2019.

The 1940s had ended on a high for the supporters who frequented Tolka Park. Drumcondra were established as one of the top sides in the country, winning consecutive titles. There were often sizeable attendances at football fixtures around the country, though neither as large nor as frequently as nostalgic recollections might suggest, and this was also true of Tolka Park. The next decade would see innovations that would stand the test of time with Tolka Park at the forefront of these changes. Despite success on the soccer pitch, gates from football matches alone weren't enough to run a football club, and the venue continued to be at the heart of entertainment in Dublin.

In June 1951 'The Gorgeous Gael' was the headline attraction on the "all-in" wrestling card at Tolka Park. A colourful character to say the least, Jack Doyle was one of Ireland's first celebrities. Described later by Eamon Dunphy as a "piss artist boxer" a string of 10 straight victories at the start of his career as a heavyweight boxer showed no little talent and brought him a wave of attention which he rode, to both fame and fortune. Having earned a shot at the British Heavyweight title, he was disqualified in the bout, causing a near riot in London in the process. He translated this sporting notoriety into a fledgling film career and discovered a tenor voice that could pack out concert halls. He went to America and caroused with the likes of Errol Flynn, seducing both the heiress to the Dodge motor fortune and her daughter. Celebrity took its toll on his sporting career. He quit boxing in 1943 and within a few years had squandered both his fortune and a marriage to Hollywood actress Movita. Alcoholic and homeless, Doyle sought to re-invent himself as a professional wrestler.

Doyle's fame drew a huge audience of almost 23,000 to Tolka Park, possibly the largest "official" attendance ever recorded at the venue. His opponent was another former boxer, "Two Ton" Tony Galento, who in 1939 had fought against Joe Louis for the world heavyweight title. Earlier in the year, Galento had beaten Doyle in London, breaking the Irishman's rib the fifth round. This time, the tables were turned in dramatic fashion, as "The Gorgeous Gael" lifted the American on his shoulders and spun him around. Both men crashed out of the ring, into the laps of the spectators below. The American's head cracked against the concrete, while Doyle recovered quickly enough to beat the count and was declared the winner. Another card was arranged for the same venue the following year, with Gargantua, "The German Giant" as Doyle's opponent, however rain intervened, and the promoters were left with a significant loss. Thus that June 1951 evening in Tolka Park was to prove a final highpoint for one of Ireland's most tragic sporting figures.

In 1952 Tolka Park was headline news, but not for sporting reasons. Ten years previously a confrontation had taken place there between two gangs. Given the weaponry involved on the day it was lucky that no-one had been killed, with only the intervention of some players preventing serious injury or death but now there would be a final, fatal outcome of that notorious day.

Patrick J Synnott, a 21-year-old coal merchant from the Coombe, had spent the day of February 27th drinking. After closing time, he and a friend retired to a milk bar, Mac's Cafe on Ormond Street, where he was having a cup of Bovril when Christopher Genockey, 31, entered. According to Synnott's own testimony, he had mentioned something about the "Tolka Park Affair" which Genockey overheard and said "Shut up you are too young to remember about it" Synnott replied "You are not too young and I heard nothing about you being in it." He then alleged that Genockey said "I am going to do you" and struck him twice before Synnott pulled a knife and stabbed Genockey once in the chest, killing him. Though Synnott had sought to get his adversary to hospital, upon being told that Genockey was already dead Synnott fled the scene immediately and disposed of the weapon. He handed himself in to Newmarket Garda Station shortly afterwards.

The prosecution case was that the quarrel dated back 18 months to when Genockey had punched Synnott. The accused denied that he had ever any dispute with, nor intended to injure the victim that evening neither did it have anything to do with gang rivalry. Synnott was found guilty and sentenced to 6 years in prison. Whatever the truth, it is clear that the events of Tolka Park, 1942 were local legend in the Coombe area long after the episode and ultimately played some part in the death of Christopher Genockey.

Drumcondra F.C.'s owners, the Hunter family, had delivered sporting success and created the first vestiges of a stadium, but it would be the Prole family that would lead the next two decades of development, when Sam Prole arrived in 1953. A supporter of Shelbourne as a boy, he was himself a handy footballer. His career with the Great Northern Railway took him to Dundalk and he was a founder member of that club, but his playing days were ended prematurely by a broken leg. He then threw himself into administration, becoming the club secretary and helping them gain membership of the Free State League ahead of Drumcondra. He also oversaw a transfer policy that helped the club turn a profit. As a key administrator within the FAI, he sat on numerous committees and served as an international selector.

Prole had informally suggested to then Drumcondra owner Walter Hunter, that were the Hunters ever considering selling the club, he would be interested in buying it. In 1952 the Hunters decided to take up this offer. After weeks of rumours, it was confirmed by the Drumcondra chairman in February 1953 that Prole had indeed left Dundalk to take over the club and the lease on Tolka Park. Funds would have to be raised and the club run as a business to survive. His son, Robert Prole, who would later go on to be both a player and director with Drums, recalls how his family were "ordinary, and had not won the sweeps or anything like that... but my father was able to get a few bob together and a deal was done".

The team and staff remained the same, but immediately Sam and his son Royden set to work behind the scenes and within a month had announced the first floodlit fixture to take place in the Republic of Ireland. At the time, floodlights were not even commonplace at English grounds, with the first international under floodlights only taking place in 1955 and the first floodlit English League fixture in 1956. St. Mirren were the visitors to Tolka Park on March 30th, 1953 as the pylons 45 feet tall, which had been installed at the corners of the ground, were illuminated with 60,000 watts of electricity for the historic occasion.

The idea of evening football outside of the late summer was very much a novelty. A chilly night meant that the crowd who witnessed Drumcondra's 2-0 victory was somewhat disappointing. Prole had invested heavily in this concept and further fixtures were laid on the coming weeks against Glenavon and Distillery. The opponents chosen simply due to connections made through Prole's role as an administrator with the association. Such networks would be crucial in arranging further fixtures. It wasn't just football that benefited from electrification, as athletics, boxing and an exhibition from the Swedish gymnastics team all took place within a couple of months of the lights being installed. The evening athletics meeting of April 14th, 1953 was even broadcast live on Radio Éireann.

The summer break provided the first opportunity to improve facilities at the ground. Again, using his connections, the new owner would borrow the groundsman from Oriel Park to tend to what was a poor playing surface. The pitch itself was re-sodded around the goal areas and was said to be billiard table-like by the start of the following season. This would not last given the sheer volume of football that was played over the course of a season. The middle of the pitch in particular could become a notorious quagmire; however it was a considerable improvement from the

pitch nicknamed 'pothole park'.

The largest undertaking in 1953 was the addition of a roof and lengthening of the reserved stand on the Richmond Road side of the ground. Running from the Drumcondra end to around the halfway line, the shape and structure of the roof was largely as seen today. A loan of £1000 was sought from the FAI to help cover construction costs of £2600 for the redevelopment, though only £750 was granted. The stand could therefore only be lengthened further in stages, evidence of this phased construction can still be seen in the Richmond Road stand today.

The move to increase comfort for spectators and facilities for the press was a wise one, bringing with it plenty of positive coverage for the new owners. This contrasted with Shels, who were tenants at Tolka Park at this time while they were in the process of building their own, larger stadium at Irishtown. The Reds were hoping to create a 'miniature Wembley' which would be equipped with a running track, but this left no finance available for a covered stand to provide shelter from the wind and rain. This lack of cover ultimately proved to be the downfall of Irishtown, while Tolka Park thrived and Shels would eventually only play one season in their Irishtown stadium in 1955/6, before becoming tenants in Drumcondra once again.

The lights became a useful marketing feature as evidenced by the Evening Herald advertisement for the meeting of Drums and St. Pat's in the LOI shield on Oct 2nd ,1953, which was billed as "Ireland's First Competitive Floodlit Game". It worked too, as the crowd was considered "splendid" for an early season fixture. Further exhibition games followed in October with Celtic inflicting the first defeat under lights on a foggy evening that tested the limits of the illumination. Two weeks later, a star-studded Vienna Wacker side would also defeat their hosts, but crowds of 10,000 for mid-week games made the home side the real winner, even with a guarantee of £1,000 needed to tempt the Austrians.

That month Tolka Park staged the first junior floodlit game between Belgrove and Home Farm. It seemed inevitable that the League of Ireland would soon see regular games under lights. There was no formal objection from the FAI council, however their blessing included the provision that neither side objected to the lights being used. Fearing the lights provided the home side an advantage, few teams were willing to take the risk. The first partially lit floodlit game did not take place until the 7th of April 1954, when a Drums side in contention for the double used the artificial light to help relieve some fixture congestion. Their compliant opponents? Dundalk.

Shortly afterwards the new owners were rewarded for their efforts, with victory in the FAI Cup securing the first silverware.

Evidence of the first permanent, covered dugouts can be seen late in 1954, positioned in front of the, then partially complete, main stand, just as they are now. However, it was never going to be all straightforward and much of the progress made was in danger of being completely wiped out when the Tolka river burst its banks on the night of Wednesday December 8th, 1954. Flood waters raged through Drumcondra, Ballybough and North Strand. A top of the table clash between Shelbourne and Drumcondra was scheduled for Sunday, but on Thursday evening it still wasn't even possible to assess the damage. When they were finally able to return, the Proles found the pitch under approximately 8 feet of water and some of the terracing at the Ballybough end washed away. An estimated £400 of damage had been caused. The secretary of the league had stated on Friday evening that it seemed unlikely the ground would be playable for at least a fortnight.

However, by Saturday Sam Prole confidently announced the pitch would be ready for the following day. His son Royden with other staff & local volunteers got straight to work, taking a sledgehammer to a further two walls to help the floodwaters to recede and pumping the remaining water. Robert Prole recalls how the residents of Richmond Road were grateful for Tolka Park's presence, which spared their homes from total ruin. As late as 3 hours before kick-off, the game was in jeopardy but passed the referee's inspection and the match went ahead. It was even noted that the pitch was in better condition than it had been for some time! The remarkable drainage assisted by the cinder foundation used when the ground was originally laid. It was an incredible achievement to even stage the game, and the crowd got to witness a magnificent comeback from the Reds, as they came back from 2 nil down to win with 3 goals in the final 11 minutes.

In 1955, the entrance at the Ballybough End was widened and with the acquisition of the adjoining garden from 110 Richmond Road, a rough banking created at that end for additional capacity. This was at least partly funded by the proceeds of a game between an All-Ireland side and England that took place in Dalymount Park in May to benefit the Tolka Park Improvements Fund. In November a new plan for Tolka Park was announced. Citing the ground's capacity as 25,000, national newspapers reported the proposal to develop a sports arena with room for a further 10,000. This was to be achieved by the building of a new, covered stand at the Ballybough End. The idea was at an advanced enough stage to warrant a visit by

a delegation from Dublin Corporation, led by the Lord Mayor, to the projected site of the new stand. Chairman Prole said "We hope to make the Park an up-to-date arena with gymnasium attached. The extent of the improvements will depend on the amount of public support we get." Just a week later planning permission was granted.

One of the more unusual abandonments in the league's history took place at Tolka Park on New Year's Day 1956. Drums and Sligo were tied at 1-1 with just a couple of minutes remaining when the visitors scored what looked like the winning goal. The home side had time for one last attack, and when referee T. Mullen spotted what he considered a hand ball awarded a second penalty of the game to Drumcondra. Some of the crowd, already riled by several contentious decisions, poured on to the pitch, but the unique nature of this protest was its non-violence. The hordes simply packed into the Sligo goal and enveloped the ref so the kick could not be taken. When it became clear that they had no intention to leave the pitch Mullen abandoned the game and received a Garda escort to the pavilion. The one brief moment of aggression coming when a stone was thrown through the window of the home side's dressing room.

By the middle of the decade Drums had yet to re-emerge as title contenders under the Proles but were in the midst of establishing the great rivalry of the era with Shamrock Rovers. A bumper crowd could be expected whenever the two sides met, even in lesser competitions such as the Dublin City Cup, or Leinster Senior Cup. In the 1956/57 season, Drums would finish runners up in the league to their southside rivals, but would claim the FAI Cup. No sooner had the season ended when the next phase of development began at Tolka Park. In late May 1957 the old pavilion was torn down to make way for an extension to the covered stand on the Richmond Road side. The steps and pathways were levelled to provide better access to the upper reaches of the stand and new dressing rooms were added beneath. At the same time a large bank was built at the Ballybough end creating further capacity behind the small terrace there. Further turnstiles were again installed at this end to cater for the increased numbers. As part of the "Prole Blueprint" the banking at this end was to be a temporary measure as the intention was to create another covered stand here which would replace the riverside as the popular side.

1958 saw another first as Tolka Park was the venue for the inaugural all-ticket match to be played in the League of Ireland. The Dublin derby between Drumcondra and Shamrock Rovers was sure to attract a large crowd, but preparations were completely insufficient for the numbers that arrived. The official attendance was just over

19,000, however those without tickets simply tore through the fencing. By kick-off the numbers were so great they reached beyond the stands, over the wall that surrounded the perimeter of the pitch, and right to the touchlines. The game could have been called off there and then, but referee Sgt. Cannon pressed ahead.

The home side were 2-1 down and, as it was in the days before substitutes were allowed, a man down due to an earlier injury. With 25 minutes left the Drumcondra goalkeeper Kelly clashed with the Rovers attacker Hamilton. The referee was about to make a decision, some say to award a penalty, others a corner, when a number of supporters encroached onto the pitch to remonstrate. What was a trickle quickly became a flood and the Garda presence was quickly overwhelmed. Drumcondra chairman Royden Prole intervened to clear the pitch. It was reported that he "heaved a number of youngsters to the touchline" before he too was then attacked by the mob and had to be rescued by the Gardai. This distraction had provided the referee the opportunity to make his escape. The match was subsequently abandoned, leading spectators to chant for their money back.

The incident was thought to be the end of any hope for the Leinster Senior Cup Final replay between the two sides, which was to be played under floodlights the following week. That game did eventually go ahead as scheduled in the evening, albeit with a larger Garda presence and the crowd limited to what was probably a truer reflection of the ground's capacity; 16,500. The points for the league game were subsequently awarded to Rovers, but despite losing out to the Hoops in three cup finals that season, the league trophy would return to Tolka Park.

Winning the league brought the prospect of European football for Tolka Park as early as 1958, however when the draw paired Drumcondra with Atletico Madrid, it was clear that the venue would be inadequate and so the fixture was instead played at Dalymount. Economic realities meant that larger games were occasionally moved to the Phibsborough venue in search of a £1000 "gate". Nevertheless, that same year international football would arrive in Tolka Park. A visiting South African side were keen to legitimise the white-only Football Association of Southern Africa which had been controversially admitted by FIFA that year. Touring in Europe and the U.K. they sought games against national sides that would be recorded as full internationals, such as their game against an Irish FA side in Belfast. The FAI were clear in promoting it that the meeting at Tolka Park was a "B" international, still a crowd of 19,000 packed in to see a 1-0 win for the home nation.

In 1959 Tolka Park could add another

couple of sports to the diverse list of activities that enthralled Dublin audiences. The fabled Harlem Globetrotters played two games on May 31st, 1959. A specially sprung court was imported from Australia for the event which saw the likes of Bob "Showboat" Hall and Joe Buckhalter demonstrating the wizardry and buffoonery that the 'Trotters' are famed for. Their patsies on this occasion were a San Francisco based side of Chinese-Americans; The Basketeers. The afternoon game finished 58-51 to the Globetrotters. The star of the show was Harlem's Meadowlark Lemon, who at one point broke away, and seeing the goalposts still standing, in a typical Globetrotters routine continued off the court and kicked the ball through the posts, in process surely becoming the only member of the Naismith Basketball Hall of Fame to "score" a goal in Tolka Park.

A full programme of entertainment was planned with a junior basketball match between sides from Dublin and Kilkenny, acrobats, unicyclists and other balancing acts. Perhaps most unusual of all were table-tennis games between former world champions Richard Bergman and "Cannonball" Fujii, which were "thoroughly enjoyed" by the crowd despite almost being spoiled by strong winds. Unfortunately, the weather continued to worsen, and the evening game had to be curtailed due to rain. The second basketball match was abandoned after the 3rd quarter, with the favourites leading 46-37. The attendance was disappointing, though some estimates put it as high as 15,000. Perhaps the rest of the audience was waiting for them at the Matt Talbot Hall where a concert would take place after the game, the Globetrotters having placed an advertisement in the previous day's Evening Herald asking for 'Tall Girls' to join them there!

As the 1950s drew to a close the supporters and owners at Tolka Park could be pleased. Comfort for spectators and players had improved immeasurably, with a blueprint in place for future expansion. Although funds were still tight, the sale of Alan Kelly to Preston in 1958 was enough to fund the team for a year or two. In another innovation, the ground was the first in the league to utilize pitchside advertising. The first ads appeared either side of the goals in 1958 and by the end of the decade space on the halfway line would remind thirsty supporters that Guinness was good for them. Although restrained by capacity, Tolka Park had led the way in pioneering changes that would forever alter how sport was enjoyed in Dublin and beyond.



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