



# TOLKA PARK:

## A HISTORY – PART III

The following article, written by David Wynne, originally appeared in Shelbourne fanzine, Red Inc. - Issue 68, in March of 2020.



By the end of the fifties Tolka Park was central to football in the capital. It played host to two of the league's pre-eminent clubs; owners Drumcondra, and their tenants Shelbourne. It was also at the heart of the biggest enmity in the league - Drumcondra versus Shamrock Rovers – and games between these sides continued to attract large attendances to the venue for as long as their duels across multiple competitions remained competitive. In the early part of the decade it seemed unthinkable that the stadium's position at the heart of football and entertainment was anything other than assured.

The future had arrived early at Tolka Park. As the sixties began other grounds had still not caught up with the advances that owners the Prole family had made in the seven years since they had taken over. While the grand plans announced in the mid-fifties had not quite come to fruition, the infrastructure in Drumcondra was still the envy of most. Dalymount and Milltown were both on a shortlist for floodlights. Phibsboro would finally see the light in 1961, while Rovers chairman Joe Cunningham claimed his club were waiting to get the right equipment. This was a wait that Hoops fans would endure for another couple of decades. Dundalk's Oriel Park lit up in 1967. St. Patrick's Athletic acknowledged the long-term business case for having lights, but for the comfort of supporters a covered stand was a more pressing concern in Inchicore. For others there was no such choice as there was finance for neither. Shelbourne were on the verge of abandoning their ambitious, but flawed, stadium in Irishtown and were reduced to renting Tolka Park.

Their rivalries were not just fought on the pitch. In 1960 Rovers and Drumcondra rowed over the use of lights in Tolka Park for a game neither side were even involved in. Drumcondra were in Milltown for a meeting with Rovers. As it was late November, the winter kick-off time of 2.45 p.m. was applied to games to ensure finishes before it became dark. Even with a reduced half-time break this didn't always mean games concluded before twilight took over. On the same day, Shelbourne were the home side at Tolka Park for a fixture against Transport, who had agreed to the second half being played under lights with a 3.30 p.m. kick off. Rovers later claimed that this caused a reduced crowd at their game and sought compensation of £50, while St. Patrick's Athletic then moved a motion of no confidence in the league president (Austin Byrne of Cork Celtic) who had sanctioned the floodlit game. This was subsequently defeated, and the lights could continue to be used for league games as long as both sides were agreeable.

Tolka Park's floodlights were crucial to the league in clearing fixture pile-ups and in particular allowing other competitions like the Leinster Senior Cup to continue. Even these fixtures had proved profitable for a time, but were to become one of the first victims of television with W.P. Murphy of the Irish Independent noting in 1960 that "(football) under lights at night has received almost a K.O. punch from television judging by the attendances on Wednesday nights." The notion of playing league games under lights would continue to cause controversy, with regional clubs in particular protesting at being asked to play matches that would finish under lights.

Although crowd sizes were as much of a worry at Tolka Park as at other League of Ireland grounds, in 1960 there was still enough business for it to be worth turning over. On March 28th thieves broke into the offices below the stands. It was believed they were searching for tickets and the proceeds of ticket sales for the Ireland v Chile international game. They found the safe open, but a director had already removed the tickets and cash. After ransacking the place, the thieves escaped with only some coins from the payphone and a few chocolate bars.

Generally, it could be said that Rovers held the upper hand in their rivalry, but in 1960-61 Drumcondra brought the League title back to Tolka Park for the fourth time. A place in the European Cup was their reward for winning the league. Tolka Park was by now used to hosting visiting European sides for friendlies, although it had yet to host a competitive European tie. When Drumcondra last won the league in 1957-58 the draw of Atletico Madrid meant that Dalymount was the preferred venue. This time German champions FC Nürnberg were the opposition. The first leg in Nuremberg ended in a 5-0 victory for the home side in front of 30,000 spectators. With the tie already virtually decided, Tolka Park hosted its inaugural European Cup game on September 13th, 1961. In spite of their comfortable first leg win, Nürnberg were taking things seriously. Working out at Tolka the day before the game, they even took a measuring tape to check the parameters of the goalposts, claiming that they "looked smaller" than those back home. An attendance of almost 11,000 saw German international Heinz Strehl open the scoring after fifteen minutes. This was almost immediately cancelled out by "Bunny" Fullam, but the visitors took control in the second half, easing to a 4-1 win. It seems that Tolka Park had enjoyed its initial taste of European football enough for Drumcondra to submit an application, ahead of any other club, to become first League of Ireland side to enter the Inter-Cities Fairs Cup the following season.

The importance of Tolka Park to Irish football was highlighted in 1961 when a storm on the night of October 22nd tore part of the roof from the stand on the Richmond Road. The force of the gale broke shop windows, left a tanker adrift in the Irish Sea, and hit the roof of the Richmond Road stand so hard the area near the turnstiles at the Ballybough end looked as though someone had taken a tin opener to it. Despite the damage, it would be business as usual, which was just as well given the fixture list for the weeks ahead.

The following evening (Wednesday) Shelbourne hosted Transport in the Shield competition, with Dundalk's tie against St. Patrick's Athletic in the same competition also being staged in Tolka Park on Friday. Drumcondra v Cork Hibernians - the big draw of the round – was scheduled for Sunday and just a day later a charity game between a Leinster League XI and English All Stars XI took place. There was no fixture slated for the next day, Tuesday, while Wednesday was left open in case a replay might be required in the Leinster Cup. It was. The City Cup Final, which had already been delayed, was finally played on Friday of the week following the storm and then the League of Ireland kicked-off the following Sunday. Shortly after that, it was expected that the lights would again be required mid-week for the Leinster Cup Semi-Finals.

It was clear that without access to the safety valve that Tolka Park provided, an already chaotic fixture list would be completely dysfunctional.

Shelbourne's title win meant that the 1961-2 champions were again based at Tolka Park, but a disappointing title defence had seen Drumcondra finish only seventh. Nevertheless, their application having been successful, they instead would compete in the predecessor to the UEFA Cup, the Inter-Cities Fairs Cup. In this competition, cities could be represented by representative sides, rather than a single club, as was the case with their opponents Odense, whose XI was drawn from four different Danish teams.

On October 3rd 1962, more than 11,000 turned up at Tolka Park to witness the first victory by a League of Ireland side in a European fixture. A superb first half performance saw the hosts 3-0 ahead at the break thanks to a brace of goals from Billy Dixon and one from Jimmy Morrissey. Odense pulled one back with fifteen minutes remaining, but a further Drums goal by Jimmy McCann was enough to secure the historic win.

That momentous win should have been enough to guarantee a comfortable passage to the second round, but two weeks later they conceded two goals in just six minutes. Despite restoring their advantage with two goals of their own before half time, Drums endured a nervous finish, conceding a further couple before prevailing 6-5 on aggregate. For their efforts they were rewarded with a tie against Bayern Munich.

Bayern at this time were by no means the European superpower they would later become. They would even miss out on selection to the inaugural Bundesliga. However, they could still boast of talents such as German international Willi Giesemann, and one of their all-time greatest forwards in Rainer Ohlhauser. The tie was as good as over after the first leg. Despite an injury to Ohlhauser during the game which forced him to switch position with the goalkeeper (substitutes were still not allowed at this point) Drums couldn't find a goal, while the Germans managed six. Nevertheless, the prospect of a classy continental side at Tolka Park, for a competitive fixture, led to hopes of big attendance. A bitterly cold night on December 12th meant only around 5,000 were there to see Drumcondra restore some pride with a 1-0 win. Billy Dixon's goal secured a symbolically important victory for Irish football, but nonetheless the fixture was a let-down financially.

The summer of 1962 saw an end to the almost annual boxing cards held at the venue. While the stadium was likely one of the outdoor venues considered for the Gilroy-Caldwell bout, considered to be one of the finest ever held on Irish soil, it lost out to Kings Hall in Belfast. Instead, middleweight Mick Leahy headlined the final contest at Tolka Park, securing a points victory over Nigeria's Orlando Paso.

As so often seemed to be the case, what might have been another lucrative fixture for Drumcondra was again spoiled by the weather. Heavy snowfall on Tuesday February 5th, 1963 made the ground unplayable, but high-flying opponents Liverpool were so keen to play, due to the big freeze in England which had prevented play for over a month, that the game was re-fixed for the following evening. Further snow and

rain made the chances of a match on Wednesday unlikely. Once again Royden Prole led the way, defying the odds by getting the ground ready, even digging a trench to drain the water. A modest crowd of 3,000 who turned up more in hope than expectation, were treated to an Ian St. John hat-trick as Liverpool overcame early resistance to win 5-1.

The highlight of the off-season entertainment for 1963 was once again the Harlem Globetrotters who returned in August. As with their visit four years earlier, acrobats and table-tennis matches were also on the bill. This time, it was 6' 8" J.C. Gipson who acknowledged the venue's primary purpose, dribbling down the pitch, dummieing a goalkeeper and putting the ball in the net, to the delight of the more than 5,000 who attended each of the shows on Saturday and Sunday in conditions far more favourable than the wind and rain that spoiled the Americans' previous appearance at Tolka Park. As was almost always the case, the Globetrotters put on an exhibition in defeating their opponents the Cherokee Indians.

It was the era of the space race and though the residents of Richmond Road were by now well used to the illumination of the pylons at Tolka Park, sometime around 1963/4 more strange lights started to appear the skies of Drumcondra. A further array of lamps had been added to the roofs of the stands on either side of the ground. A joke at the time was that the original floodlights were only bright enough to use during the daylight so the additional lux provided by these alien-looking antennae enhanced the experience for players and spectators alike.

Some high-profile league or cup games would still attract large crowds, but the bursting-to-capacity scenes of earlier decades were now seldom repeated at Tolka Park. When the landlords faced their tenants in the FAI cup it was a bumper gate. For most of the decade the visit of Shamrock Rovers generated a gate of £800 or more, but fewer games now had to be switched from Tolka to Dalymount Park in the hope of greater takings.

Like most clubs Drumcondra were barely keeping their heads above water and were heavily reliant on player sales and renting out the ground for other events. In 1964 a notice appeared in national papers advising that Drumcondra Football Club Limited had been placed into voluntary liquidation a couple of years earlier. Although a note explained that this was merely "part of a scheme of re-organisation of the company" and Sam Prole stressed that "club policy is unchanged and there will be no change in the running of the club", it was at the very least a warning of the difficulties ahead.

The most immediate difficulty was the expiration of the lease on the ground. Drumcondra would soon be renting year-to-year and were keen to secure a long-term lease. Dublin Corporation had valued the new rent at £1100 per annum. This was a massive increase on the £84 per annum that the club were currently paying. Even worse, was the news that this valuation applied to the venue being used for football only. £2000 was the rate required if the club wanted to continue using it for boxing and other non-football events.



One final 'extra-curricular' event caused controversy when rumours appeared in late 1964 that the international assembly of Jehovah's Witnesses was to take place at Tolka Park. An objection came from Bohemian's club secretary Andy Kettle, who protested that "It is disturbing to see a club under the jurisdiction of the league and F.A.I. renting its ground to a group who is opposed to the constitution." The poker-faced reply from Drumcondra denied knowledge of the Jehovah's Witnesses having even booked the ground: "The International Bible Students Association had requested to hold their annual convention in Tolka Park next June which we granted" It did not take long for press to confirm that this was in fact the legal title of Jehovah's Witnesses.

Though the terms of the new lease specified football only, a meeting of Dublin Corporation's planning committee was told that as this had not yet been signed-off, it could not be enforced. A submission from Bord Fáilte, emphasizing the value of the visitors this event would bring, doubtless helped ensure permission was granted. Up to 4,000 members from around the world travelled to the convention, held from June 9th to 13th. The goalposts at the Drumcondra end were removed to make way for a stage, featuring a giant, open bible and harp. 120 speakers in the stands formed a special low-level sound system ensuring the delegates within the ground heard the word of God, while outside local residents were neither disturbed nor indoctrinated by the religious sect. The event was considered a success, the organization's vice-president thanked Drumcondra Football Club and said the Witnesses would take happy memories of Dublin with them.

Pipping their great rivals to the League of Ireland title in 1964-5 would prove to be the final major success of the Prole era. The centre of power in the league shifted to regional clubs and it would be another ten years before the title returned to the capital. Europe again pitted Drumcondra against German opposition, this time East German champions A.S.K. Vorwaerts were the visitors as, what one journalist described as "the glamour of European Cup football" returned to Tolka Park.

Having more European experience and a number of internationally capped players, the Berlin side were clear favourites. However, the home team were creating something of a fortress on the banks of the Tolka, winning 1-0; a third consecutive home European win. The media differed on the influence of the 8,000 strong crowd with the Irish Independent praising the vocal support offered by the sodden spectators, while Stanley Bergin in the Evening Herald bemoaned the lack of enthusiasm at full-time, detecting a note of begrudgery too. Sam Prole too was disappointed by the public support, telling the Herald that an attendance of 10,000 was needed to avoid a heavy financial loss on the tie, and emphasising the cost of off-season improvements to the ground; £2,000. A 3-0 defeat in the second leg meant that this was Drumcondra's final European game at Tolka Park.

Another disappointing title defence in the 1965-6 season saw Drumcondra finish only seventh and they would never again finish higher than that. Despite this, efforts to upgrade the ground continued in 1966 with the installation of new seating in the stand on the

Richmond Road side. That season they made one final effort at making a success of Europe. The draw of Eintracht Frankfurt was enough to convince that the greater capacity of Dalymount Park would be required. For once the weather was set fair, but both the result and the crowd went against Drumcondra. A 2-0 defeat was compounded by being barracked by their own supporters and stones being thrown at the Frankfurt goalkeeper. The game was stopped by the referee at one point to request the presence of Gardai behind the away goal. The crowd was less than 10,000 meaning that Drumcondra lost £500 on the fixture. A 6-0 drubbing away from home ended that year's European adventure, but already there were signs it would be the last. The frustrations of the chairman were evident, and he stated, "We will have to think very hard before we enter again." It would not be a choice they would have to make, as they slipped further down the league. By the end of the sixties they were propping up the table and forced to apply for re-election for the first time since they had entered the league in 1928.

A new decade failed to bring with it a change in fortunes and again Drumcondra finished bottom of the league in 1970-71. For a number of years, the club had been in ongoing negotiations with Dublin Corporation about a new lease. A new lease was eventually agreed, with a term of 99 years, however the Corporation had increased the ground rent substantially and required costly upgrades to the wall by the riverbank. Former Drumcondra director Robert Prole recalls the straw that broke the camel's back was the Corporation backdating the new rates, which left the club with debts of approx. £6000.

Not for the last time, events in Phibsboro might dictate Tolka Park's prospects. In 1972 Drumcondra, along with Bohemians arranged for a money-spinning friendly against Brazilian side Santos in Dalymount Park. Pele was the big draw and with his retirement imminent it would likely be the last opportunity for Irish soccer fans to see the superstar in action. Royden Prole flew to the U.K. to negotiate the deal. Pele's fee alone was more than £1000. The FAI were reportedly also interested in securing a fixture but were massively outbid by the Drums-Bohs consortium, whose guarantee to the South American side must have been in the region of five figures.

The two clubs fielded a combined XI, wearing red shirts and blue shorts, which in the end featured just three players from Drumcondra. Pele was contracted to play the entire ninety minutes, which it was hoped would boost the attendance. On the day a little over 27,000 paid £2 a ticket to see the legend go through the motions in his sides 3-2 victory. Whatever relief it brought in the short-term, it was not enough to clear Drumcondra's debts.

Rumours of a takeover at Tolka were already in the air before the Dalymount event. Businessman Shane Redmond was reported to have first been approached by Drumcondra for funding and was again approached by the club's then manager Ambie Fogarty with a view to taking over the club. Though he was, by all accounts, a GAA man, Redmond had been suspended by the organization for playing soccer after earning a trial with Bohemians. His plans for the club were unknown, but he viewed it as "an entertainment" and said, "the appearance and the amenities of the grounds should be

given a new glamour." His interest was taken seriously enough that he was shown fully audited accounts, and met with the directors many times, but in the end, nothing came of this. Perhaps this is just as well as the Sunday Independent speculated that he could use the Tolka Park site for an office block.

In March 1972 news broke that there were moves afoot to secure a bout in Dublin featuring Muhammad Ali. Promoter Butty Sugrue was confident that having a lodged a deposit with Ali's people the fight would go ahead in June or July. All that was needed was a venue. In that evening's newspaper, a photograph of the press conference features the smiling faces of the promoter Sugrue, bookmaker Terry Rogers - who was also chairman of the Irish Boxing Board of Control - and wearing perhaps the biggest grin of all Sam Prole. Was 'The Greatest' coming to Tolka Park? The man from the Irish Press was prepared to bet on it.

Within weeks it was confirmed that Ali would fight in Drumcondra, but the bout would likely take place at the larger venue, Croke Park. In July, the card drew just under 19,000 to GAA headquarters. Sure, times were somewhat different, and permission would have had to be sought to go beyond the terms of the lease, but twenty-one years previously Tolka had catered for almost 23,000 to see Jack Doyle grapple. How differently things might have panned out over the next few months, had Tolka Park been able to secure the event.

For months the future of Tolka Park was in the balance. Then, on May 19th 1972 a hastily arranged press conference at the Gresham Hotel ensured the evening newspapers had the scoop on the "biggest financial transaction in the history of Irish soccer." With the transfer of Sam, Royden and Robert Prole's shareholdings, amateur side Home Farm took over Drumcondra F.C. as well as Tolka Park "lock, stock and barrel". News of the sale came as a surprise to Shelbourne manager Gerry Doyle who told the Irish Press "I'm dumbfounded. The first I heard of it was when I read a newspaper poster in Ranelagh. I think we should have been told. I'm certain Shelbourne would have been interested in a deal".

The deal was arrived at in much the same way as the Proles had come to acquire Tolka Park in the first place. Home Farm had indicated that if Drumcondra were ever thinking of selling, they would be interested. It was an arrangement that made sense to both parties. Home Farm had been repeatedly frustrated in their applications to join the League of Ireland since the mid-sixties, with the most strident opposition coming from down the road in Drumcondra. 1971-2 was the first season for some years where Home Farm hadn't applied for senior status. Now they would compete at senior level as Home Farm Drumcondra. On the other side the Proles believed that the development of their club could be pushed along by having Home Farm as a nursery. More than that, they felt that selling to someone with a love of the game was important and were keen that it remain as a sporting facility.

At the press conference, Robert Prole stated "We have had enough. It is too much for a family to run a club like this in the seventies." Almost half a century later, speaking to Red Inc, he tells it the same way. "It wasn't feasible for us as a family to run the club. We had never

made money out of it, but if you could make enough out of it to keep it going, that's what you'd do." ... (My father) was getting on. Royden did a lot of the work. He drove from Dundalk to Dublin five days a week, he was still working with the GNR in Dundalk while he was managing and coaching."

After almost 20 years, an electrifying era in the history of Tolka Park came to an end. The vision and ambition shown by the Prole family had propelled both the ground and Irish football forward. For almost five decades it had been home to one of the league's most successful clubs. It had been developed from a field, into a compact, and for its time, modern stadium. It was the site of innovations that would stand the test of time. Now another renowned club would call Tolka Park their home.





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off with a Guinness