

## MIXED EMOTIONS: TRIUMPH AND TREACHERY ON A PARISIAN NIGHT

## National hysteria cannot mask how well we played when shackles were off



Had the Irish manager been less cautious earlier in the campaign, it might all have been so different, writes **John O'Brien**

**I**N a week when sober analysis was in short supply, two questions were left hanging in the cruel Parisian air. Should Ireland have pressed home their superiority and dumped France out of the World Cup? Unquestionably. And over the course of the campaign — remove the green blinkers for a moment — did they do enough to merit a place in South Africa? Truthfully, you would have to say no.

When the pain at the nature of their exit eases and the national yearning for martyrdom mercifully subsides, Ireland's players will look back wistfully and wonder why the game was allowed to develop long enough for Thierry Henry to take matters in hand. John O'Shea, Damien Duff and Robbie Keane all had the chance to be a hero for all time. Three glorious opportunities to settle it. More than they could ever have hoped for.

What Wednesday did, though, at a single stroke was to significantly erase the memory of the dross we had been served over the previous 14 months. A team that had struggled horribly to beat Cyprus and Georgia travels to Paris and, with backs against the wall, delivers a performance of such stunning virtuosity that it drains the home team of confidence and leaves them reeling. How could that have happened? Where on earth did Wednesday come from?

Maybe we have been too busy negotiating the seven stages of grief to ask such questions. The silliness has been staggering. Those of us fortunate to be abroad when the nation went into meltdown in the summer of 2002 got a small taste of what it must have been like living daily amongst the hysteria and the outrage. On Thursday afternoon, *Liveline* — where else? — even threw up its own "what about the kids?" moment and you were pleading for it to stop.

Amid the madness we overlooked the game's truly compelling statistic. It is this: in the one game where Giovanni Trapattoni's ultra-cautious approach, if not entirely abandoned, was of least relevance since his arrival as Ireland boss, his team not only managed to produce, by some distance, its best performance under his stewardship but arguably the best result ever achieved by an Ireland side in a competitive fixture.

How much of this was down to a change of heart on the part of the manager, or the players themselves casting off their straitjackets, we can't be sure. Nobody asked the question. Instead we got Keane and Liam Brady musing about FIFA conspiracies, Trapattoni gently lecturing reporters about morality, any number of Irish players wallowing in despair. Analysis of the game was thin on the ground.

In one sense it would be dangerous to take the evidence of Wednesday's game at face value. After all, teams with their backs against the wall are quite often capable of summoning reserves that would be beyond them on more routine days. How else could you explain 10-man Ireland toppling Holland in 2001 or the adrenaline-fuelled passage that took them all the way to the second round of the following year's World Cup?

Still, you could treat Ireland's

performance with a healthy dose of suspicion if you wished and still arrive at a few compelling conclusions, still wonder at the wisdom of a tactical regime that sacrifices individual skill for the greater work ethic. For as close as he came to sainthood in the Stade de France, Trapattoni still hasn't dispensed the notion that he is holding the team back as much as he is pushing it forward.

The prosecution would probably consider the case of Duff as its opening exhibit. No player personified the extremes of last week in starker detail: the tireless automaton who ran himself into the ground in Dublin and the dancing livewire who took the fight to France on Wednesday night. The thing about the delicious one-two he played with Kevin Kilbane and the vision to pick out Keane with his cross was that we had all but forgotten that Duff had these gifts in his armoury.

## Introducing the Stoke winger for the frustrating Aiden McGeady was the greatest masterstroke of the Italian's reign thus far

Duff is 30 now but will remain a key figure for Ireland for the next five years at least. No one knows more than himself that, for all his natural talent, he remains an underachiever. But there is time to put that right. Duff, you sense, will turn up and play for Ireland as long as Trapattoni wants him and chase back as much as his manager asks him, but it isn't the game he was born to play or what supporters pay ever-increasing admission prices to witness.

Perhaps impressed by the quality of his team going forward, Trapattoni will be persuaded to adopt a less cautious approach from now on, though you wouldn't bet on it. Yet the Italian isn't quite as stubborn as many suppose. How many managers would have gambled on the uncertain talents of Liam Lawrence at the climactic stages of the campaign? Introducing the Stoke winger for the frustrating Aiden McGeady was the greatest



masterstroke of the Italian's reign thus far.

You think of Duff and Lawrence, of the growing stature of Keith Andrews and Glenn Whelan, of a defence that, though shaky at times, still held itself together admirably enough and, suddenly, the future seems rosier than it has for some time. When Trapattoni picked up the broken shards from the catastrophic reign of Steve Staunton last year, there seemed little enough ground for harbouring high hopes. Hell, this time last week not all that much seemed to have changed.

The circumstances of Wednesday's game ensure that Trapattoni will proceed into his second two-year term with his stature and popularity enhanced. Yet for all the progress his team has made you still couldn't muster a convincing argument that the Italian has had a faultless campaign. Far from it. Even at the outset a play-off spot looked eminently achievable. And that was before we discovered that Bulgaria were hopeless and Italy a shadow of their 2006 World Cup-winning selves. Anything less would have gone down as dismal failure.

And in the background the question keeps nagging. Could Ireland have achieved more if they weren't shackled to the manager's rigid system and given more licence to surge forward? Before Wednesday the broad consensus seemed to be that Trapattoni had taken a limited group of players as far as they had any right to go. Wednesday wasn't definitive but it challenged that consensus and raised interesting questions about the continuing development of the team.

So a certain fear will continue to stalk us as we head for the first friendlies of the year in the spring and then to autumn when the Euro 2014 campaign kicks into gear. Will we see a return to the negative approach of the previous campaign, unimpressive results eked out in deathly quiet stadiums? Will the talents of Andy Reid continue to be ridiculously ignored? Will watching Ireland numb rather than uplift the soul again?

Trapattoni will say it is only about winning, of course. That's what it was about, too, for Henry on Wednesday. And though we decry moral victories around these parts nowadays consider what the alternative might have been: Ireland achieving the scoreless draw that was their target in Dublin followed by a repeat in Paris and the pot luck of penalty kicks, somewhat mimicking Ireland's progress at Italia '90 when they achieved the dubious distinction of reaching the quarter-final without winning a game.

So it's time to stop the silliness and cherish an epic contest for everything that was good about it: an Irish team fighting for its life with courage and skill and fortitude, restoring the faith of a public that for the most part had largely been indifferent to them. If there was truly a consolation after their harrowing exit, it lay in the hope that, in pushing the French to the pin of their collars, Ireland laid down a marker for the future.

in Brussels later in the same campaign. Portuguese referee Raul Nazare came under fire when he first disallowed a perfectly good Frank Stapleton goal, and then awarded a highly dubious free-kick from which Belgium scored the winner three minutes from the end. Ireland missed out on the World Cup on goal difference. The players branded Nazare a cheat and a thief while manager Eoin Hand implied that Nazare may have taken a bribe. Nazare later claimed that he had wanted Ireland to win the game. He had a funny way of showing it.

**MARCO VAN BASTEN** (Ireland v Holland, June 18, 1988) THE great Dutch team of 1988 would not have been remembered with anything like the reverence it is today if it wasn't for a disgraceful decision

## FIVE GREAT VILLAINS OF IRISH FOOTBALL

**JOHN ATYEO** (Ireland v England, May 19, 1957) IRELAND were just seconds away from forcing a play-off with England to see which team would go to the 1958 World Cup finals in Sweden when John Atyeo scored a crucial goal at Dalymount Park. Alf Ringstead had given Ireland an early lead in a game they went on to dominate and should have scored two or three more. Injury time wasn't as common a phenomenon in 1957 but referee Hugh Phillips found nearly two minutes from somewhere which allowed Tom Finney to beat Noel Cantwell on the wing and Atyeo rose to head the equaliser and silence the 50,000 crowd.

**AUGUSTO LAMO CASTILLO** (France v Ireland, October 28, 1980) THE incident with Thierry Henry isn't

the first time a handball decision has gone against Ireland in Paris. The 1982 World Cup qualifying campaign had started impressively for Eoin Hand's side with victory over Cyprus and Holland and a draw with Belgium. It began to unravel in Paris, however, when Ireland, already trailing 1-0, were denied a perfectly good equaliser when referee Augusto Castillo ruled that Kevin Moran had handled in the build-up to Michael Robinson's equaliser. Replays showed that Moran had headed the ball, but the goal was chalked off before France went on to add a second against a demoralised Ireland in the dying minutes.

**RAUL NAZARE** (Belgium v Ireland, March 25, 1981) WHAT happened in Paris in 1980 was nothing compared to what followed

## Hand of fate a

**T**HE day before Ireland played France at Croke Park, Giovanni Trapattoni was asked about the 2006 World Cup final. "That was a game," he remarked, "decided on the little details." As he said this, Trapattoni winked and smiled. The little detail that night in Berlin was Zinedine Zidane's headbutt which was, most people in football are now agreed, missed by the referee but seen on a TV monitor by the fourth official who, unofficially and in contravention of the regulations, informed the referee. Zidane was sent off.

On Wednesday night in the Irish dressing room in Paris, Ireland's players wanted confirmation of another little detail that would soon become the biggest sports story of the year.

In the sound-proofed dressing-room, the players couldn't hear the half-hearted party the French were trying to throw outside. If anyone wanted to speak, they could make themselves heard but all there was was devastation and silence. Trapattoni was crying. "Do you want me to cry again?" he asked one journalist on Thursday, his eyes red and his energy gone after another extraordinary 24 hours in his life.

Nobody was discussing the forensics of defending the free-kick as Roy Keane might have wished. Instead, they waited until somebody produced a DVD of the game and those who had not seen it watched Henry's handball and erupted in anger. The silence was gone.

The mixed zone can often be a futile place to be but not on Wednesday night. Irish players who had performed bravely on the pitch now sought out Irish reporters. The team had found a voice again.

## 'Why, when he understood that he had made a mistake, did he not change his mind? I think the time has come to have TV replays for these extreme cases'

The men who had been outstanding on the field, who had grown in stature throughout this campaign, now wanted to share their pain. There may be some technically limited players in the Ireland side but there are several leaders. In fact, there was not one player who started the game in Paris who did not demonstrate immense character.

Richard Dunne, Robbie Keane, Shay Given, Damien Duff and Kevin Kilbane were among those who stopped to talk and try to come to terms with what had happened. Some like Dunne and Keane felt that Martin Hansson's failure to spot the handball was merely the final act in FIFA's plan to prevent the little guy from getting a chance at the World Cup. Kilbane was more considered. He just thought it was "outrageous", "disgraceful" and "the most blatant handball I've ever seen". Duff was beret.

"I don't think I'll ever get over it. I'll probably be on my death bed and it will be one of the last things I think about. I had a sixth sense, he's going to give this, they want the big teams at the World Cup. You don't know what goes on behind the scenes. The people with power — Platini, Blatter — they'd rather have France there than Ireland there so it's not a hard decision.

"It's not fucking rocket science," he said, his voice cracking as he spoke "but, Jesus, there's a screen there, the whole world and his dog has seen it. It will take two seconds, it's in rugby union, rugby

After an extraordinary sporting week, Ireland are left with nothing apart from that familiar feeling of injustice, says **Dion Fanning**

league. It doesn't stall the game. The size of the game tonight, it's a joke."

Nobody was laughing. By the time Giovanni Trapattoni had returned to Italy on Thursday night and taken a call from Jose Mourinho who rang to console him, his position had hardened.

In Dublin, he had spoken of the need for video replays, complained once more about the seeding and questioned the format of the play-offs. Maybe it was the conversation with Mourinho, a great conspiratorialist, but Trapattoni now had a simple message.

"There's this double handball from Henry on Gallas' goal and on top of that Squillaci was offside. It's murder.

"Even a blind man would have seen the double handball by Henry. The linesman was on line as the images show and he had perfect vision.

"I am certain that Hansson was in contact with the fourth official and to those who were looking at the images in slow motion.

"Why, when he understood that he had made a mistake, did he not change his mind? I think the time has come to have TV replays for these extreme cases. In 30 seconds you avoid colossal errors. FIFA has done a great job. For France v Ireland, you needed a top referee, instead they have sent a Hansson nobody."

If Hansson, as Trapattoni alleged, had been told by the fourth official at the time that there was a handball, then Ireland would have their stitch-up. The little details had gone against them and there would be no justice.

Hansson told Kilbane that the ball had hit Henry's chest, but there was some concern that the understandable frenzy confused the ref who thought they were claiming Gallas had handled it and that was what the linesman was asked about. All Ireland were left with with regret and a feeling that nothing would change the result unless the FFF agreed to a replay.

The FAI had found the French federation difficult to deal with long before the FAI felt they had a moral imperative to agree to a replay and protect the integrity of the game.

At one of the pre-match dinners in Dublin, French Football Federation president Jean-Pierre Escalettes

stood up and said "We know we'll win." An FAI official responded, "The last fella to say that was Dutch." This time, after a long process and with some soul-searching, Escalettes was right.

The Federation is viewed in France as the FAI is viewed in Ireland, although while the FAI may be criticised a little less in nearly every quarter since the appointment of Raymond Domenech ensured the continued ridicule. If the FFF was running Irish football, Steve Staunton would still be manager.

Two years ago, Robbie Keane walked onto the *Late, Late Show* and made a plea for understanding as Staunton's time ended. He became tongue-tied and incoherent. The PR exercise was regarded as ill-advised, if it had been advised at all.

Keane has no need for PR gimmicks now. The Irish team which, with a few notable exceptions, is the same as the team Staunton managed, now is perceived completely differently.

## He sought out Richard Dunne for the photo opportunity that he hoped would salvage his reputation

Paris was the final act in that rehabilitation and it may have been aided by the heart-breaking nature of the defeat. In Paris, there was only one PR man.

There was a moment after the game on Wednesday night when Thierry Henry caught a glimpse of himself on the big screen and stopped celebrating as he had done wildly when William Gallas scored. He might have noticed that his face had appeared a lot, sensed that he had been rumbled and implemented his next plan: he sought out Richard Dunne for the photo opportunity that he hoped would salvage



his reputation. No Irish footballer criticised Henry for the handball, only the referee for not seeing it, but while the hysteria built around him, Henry tried to play it all ways.

The feeling within the FAI yesterday was that if Henry had admitted the handball on Thursday and called for a replay, then the momentum would have become unstoppable. His statement on Friday may have been a PR exercise or it may have been act of contrition. Thierry Henry is not a cheat but he is a PR man and the suspicion remained that he felt it was too late to make any difference.

"The thing that shocked me most wasn't the handball," said Eric Cantona. "What shocked me most was that — in front of the cameras — he went and sat down next to an Irish

## Henry's a

**W**HAT the hell is Richie Dunne sitting next to that prick for?" It was a question several fans next to me were asking after the final whistle in the Stade de France on Wednesday. "Surely he should either be blanking him or thumping him?" It may prove to be a difficult thing to explain, but in the game in which he clearly excels, Thierry Henry has done nothing out of the ordinary. He did exactly what we would expect any of our players to do, and given the prize at stake, it's exactly what they would have done.

During any game, there are three principal ways to cheat — deliberately break the rules, accidentally break them but fail to admit to it, or stick within the rules but go against the spirit of the game (eg gamesmanship). By definition, Henry is a cheat. End of discussion.

## Evan Fanning



which sent Holland into the semi-finals of the European Championships at Ireland's expense. With eight minutes to go and the game scoreless, Ronald Koeman hit a volley from outside the box which came off the turf and bounced into the path of

Wim Kieft. The striker's header was going several yards wide but, like a golf shot pitching on the green, it spun back towards the goal and past Packie Bonner. To make matters worse, Marco van Basten was in an offside position and clearly obstruct-

ing Bonner's view. The Austrian referee allowed the goal and Holland went on to win the tournament.

**SALVATORE 'TOTO' SCHILLACI** (Ireland v Italy, June 30, 1990) NOT too many people in Italy remember Toto Schillaci (left). In Ireland he will never be forgotten. He played just 16 times for his country and came from nowhere to take the Golden Boot at the 1990 World Cup with six goals. One of those six was the goal which knocked Ireland out at the quarter-final stage. Packie Bonner was unable to hold Robero Donadoni's powerful shot and Schillaci swept the ball into the empty net. Despite ending our first World Cup campaign, Schillaci became a playground hero and later appeared in an ad for Smithwick's looking slightly bemused.