

Grassroots Conference 2015

'The Development of Regional Infrastructures for Association Football in Ireland: An Historical and Contemporary Assessment, 1945-2010'

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This paper examines the development of grass root structures for association football in Ireland in the period from 1945 until 2010. It will focus largely on regional developments, examining in detail the growth of structures for soccer clubs at schoolboy and adult level. In addition, attempts to develop coaching at a national and local level will be addressed, particularly the appointment of a national coach by the Football Association of Ireland in 1951 and subsequent attempts to train coaches as well as instruct young players in the techniques of the game. It will show that in the Republic, senior league structures have been slow to be implemented on a county-by-county basis, whereas soccer's development was quicker in cities such as Dublin and Cork. Similarly, schoolboy structures have been slow to be initiated in more provincial areas, with the Gaelic Athletic Association's 'Ban' on 'foreign games', which was not removed until 1971, impacting on soccer's growth in the Irish countryside. The attitudes of schools towards the playing of certain sports will also be assessed and a contrast with events in Northern Ireland and further afield will be given. The more recent development of the FAI's Emerging Talent Scheme has allowed more rurally based players a greater chance to progress, but for a long time, players based in peripheral counties lacked a clear pathway to higher levels of competitive football. The widening of scouting networks will also be examined, as the past two decades have seen the recruitment to English professional football of players from areas traditionally associated with Gaelic football such as County Kerry. In general, however, Dublin has been the powerhouse of soccer in the Republic, while in Northern Ireland, Belfast and Derry city have been the main centres in terms of player production to professional league football in England. The migration of players such as Aaron Hughes (Tyrone) to more prominent youth clubs in east Ulster will be assessed, while other counties in the west of the province such as Fermanagh have traditionally produced few players breaking into English League Football. This paper draws on interviews with professional footballers from throughout Ireland who have played league football in England having come through underage structures at home in the post-war period until 2010, while the views of coaches and development officers on the subject are also utilised. These were undertaken as part of a FIFA Havelange Scholarship awarded in 2013.

Keywords: Association Football; Grassroots Level; Ireland; Geographical Distribution; Players; Migration.