

Introduction

The roots of local soccer go back at least to the late 1920's, when Ennis United competed in the Free State Cup. The game then went dormant with little or no organised soccer played. Then, in March 1960 an enthusiastic group led by Michael O' Gorman reorganised Association Football.

Amongst the first clubs to affiliate were Hermitage, Lifford F.C. and St. Michael's, the latter forming in 1960. A feature of Clare soccer at this time was the contribution made by many of the factories. Apart from providing employment, Gardimax, Interstretch and Angers all fielded good teams.

The first cup final was played on 26th May 1963. The finalists were Lifford F.C. and Angers. Prior to the kick-off the teams were led on to the park by the Ennis Accordion Band. Lifford proved best on the day, winning 6-2. Of the winning panel the Marian Avenue area supplied – Noel Bane, Noel Carmody, Paddy Coughlan, Fred Ensko, Peadar Kelly, Anthony Lynch and John Pickford, a huge contribution. Peadar Kelly was just a youth of 16. After the game the cup was presented to Syl Cosgrove by Richard (Dick) Prendergast.

In 1960/61 a team called Ennis United played clubs in the Limerick and Galway leagues. The Ennis XI was possibly a grouping of some of the best players then playing. At various times Ennis included players of the calibre of Michael Arthur, Peadar O'Brien, Paddy Coughlan, Al Guy, Audie Geres, Ken & Gordon Hosie, and Peter White. These players and others came in for great praise in the sports columns of the Clare Champion. The Hosie brothers and Peter White were Scottish and Audie Geres was Austrian. Naturally being brought up with soccer they were very good. They had all the moves but so did the locals. 'Pike Hibernians played in the Galway area of the FAI cup. This side included John Hayes, Michael Frawley, Massie Dilger, and Frankie Flynn. Like Ennis United, 'Pike also seemed to be handpicked from the town of Ennis.

The Fergus Cup was suspended in 1964 and '65, though a league competition was played in 1964. In 1966, the Fergus Cup was re-organised. Hermitage, Wanderers, The Pressmen and Lifford were to the fore. Those staring for Lifford were Stephen Flynn, Eamon Moloney and John & Bernard Carroll. Lifford defeated Rockmount (Clarecastle) 5-1 in a tough encounter with plenty of strong tackling

1966 was also an important year for soccer with live television coverage of the World Cup for the first time on RTE Television. Gifted players like Eusebio (Portugal), Seeler (West

Germany), and Bobby Moore (England) suddenly became household names. Soccer was now growing in popularity. Bridge United (Sixmilebridge) was founded in 1966. Then in January 1968 Newmarket Celtic was welcomed into the Clare League. Coonagh United would follow in 1971.

My first real memory of domestic cup football is the 1968 final played in glorious sunshine at the Fair Green between Rockmount and Hermitage. Due to a dispute with the Clare League, Lifford amalgamated with (and played under the name of) Rockmount for one season. In what was for the most part and evenly contested game, Aidan Lynch hit a "purple patch" in the second half, scoring four cracking goals. This has to be a record in Clare Cup soccer history. On the day Hermitage were luckless with Frank Molloy and Joe Connery hitting the woodwork. Aside from Aidan Lynch, others to shine were Paddy Szmidt, Nicholas Moloney and Bernard Carroll. Rockmount/Lifford had bridged a five year gap.

Mostly I followed Braids United and Lifford. These were two good footballing clubs who played an attractive game. The games played at Gardisette or Our Lady's retain fond memories. The wall at the far side of Our Lady's provided great shelter from the elements on wintry Sunday mornings. Then, in the 1971 season, an excellent County Youths eleven captured the Oscar Traynor National Cup. Davy Connellan from Steele's Terrace was an ever-present member of this team.

The influx of young men from abroad also helped improve the standard of play. Keith Jackson came to Ennis from Liverpool. Gert Lacheiner and midfield genius Siegfried Wolke were Austrian. Paddy English came from Tipperary Town, Lex Monaghan from Derry City. Mick Newell (Galway), Ronnie McSweeney (Cork), Brian Greene and Brian Farrell (both Dublin) were other excellent players. Farrell, the ex-Shelbourne player, is considered one of the best ever by good judges of the game. Many others will remember Ronnie McSweeney's fruitful partnership with Noely Ryan in the Braids Team.

Braids United founded in 1968, was a glamorous team. In 1970, captained by Victor Greene, they won the league. Later that year they drew 1-1 with Newmarket Celtic in the Fergus Cup Final. The Celtic goal came from a Tim McAllister penalty after Tony Mounsey was taken down in the box. The Clare Champion described the play as "*Thrilling, throbbing and tremendously exciting, truly memorable final.*"

Braids, playing in an all white strip, caught the imagination of the Ennis public. A big crowd turned up at Angers Ground (Clonroad) for the replay. Controversy dogged the tie and with Braids leading 1-0, the Cup Final was abandoned. Remarkably, in late August, the second replay was also abandoned after 85 mins with Newmarket leading 3-1. The Cup was awarded to

Newmarket. Then on September 19th, 1970, the Clare Champion reported the news that Braids United was to change its name to Bohemians.

But Braids with their unmistakable style left a lasting impression. They had class players throughout the field but their forward line was particularly lethal. The side that drew 1-1 with Newmarket Celtic was – Noel McEnery, Michael Sheridan, Brendan Butler, Paul Sexton, Séan Lynch, Terence Tierney, Martin Kelly, Ronnie McSweeney, Noel Ryan, Peter Sheridan, Patrick Murphy.

Around this time the Champion ran a headline "*Is soccer on the decline?*" The article had nothing to do with the standard of the play, which was high, but the author felt that there was too many teams "clustering one another out of existence." Hermitage, possibly the oldest club in the town, always had great players such as Arthur Greer, Paddy Dinan, Gerry Gilligan and Peter Skerritt. I always felt that if the 'Tage had united many of their stars under the one banner, they could have been a truly great force outside the county. The Hermitage area also produced a strong side called Hibernians.

In September, 1972 Lifford amalgamated with Interstretch under the name Lifford United. Backed by an excellent management team, Lifford entered possibly its greatest period ever over the following years. In 1973, they were most unlucky to lose 1-0 to Rockmount (Cork) in an advanced stage of the F.A.I. Cup. Noel Carmody presided as Chairman of the club for most of this period. Davy Connellan one of Lifford's top players also credits the role played by Eamonn Kelly. "Eamonn was an outstanding delegate for Lifford. He was great to fight our corner at board meetings."

Ennis Albion and Villa came later. Albion was founded in 1977. They were another good footballing side who moved the ball around well. Some of their best-known players included Liam 'Scruff' Ryan, Michael Leahy, Kevin Woods, Michael 'Weese' Woods and Noel Dinan. Noel was an experienced 'keeper who had given service to Menrad and others. Villa too had many excellent players including Pat Tracey and Joe Hanrahan.

During the years 1979 -1983 St. Michaels had a great spell. In '79, they won the Munster Junior (Clare Area). Later that season, a goal by Noel McCarthy, in extra time, proved the difference in their 1-0 win over Bridge Celtic.

St. Michaels retained the cup in 1980 with a merited 2-0 victory over Newmarket Celtic. The Cup was presented by Ciarán Haughey, a son of Charles J. Haughey, to Dermot O'Loughlin who had a terrific game for the winners. In 1981 the Saints celebrated their 21st.

Newmarket Celtic dominated the Haughey Cup in 1981 and 1982 and were poised for a three in a row in '83 but were stopped by St. Michaels. Interestingly, in the build up to the Cup Final the Clare Champion reported "Can Newmarket win the Haughey Cup for the third year in succession and thus win the trophy outright or will St. Michaels win back the cup after a two year break?" In 1983 St. Michaels added the Premier League to this Haughey Cup win.

Cloughleigh Celtic later amalgamated with Albion in the mid 1990's. Celtic produced a great youths team, possibly the best in 25 years. They contested the National Youths Final, losing to Home Farm 2-0. After the game, the celebrated coach, Liam Tuohy paid tribute to the youths and management of Cloughleigh Celtic when he spoke to Gerry Scanlon of Clare F.M.

Sporting History

The Old Boreen/Steele's Terrace has a long sporting history. The Faughs GAA club was formed in the terrace in 1944. Éire Óg hurling club also has its roots in the terrace. The Clare Champion of November 1954 reported under the headline "*Boreen Will Soon Disappear. One of the oldest areas, the Boreen and its last remaining dwellings, will be demolished and a new housing estate is to be erected*". The sixty-four houses of Marian Avenue were built by Solon & Garvey, at a cost of £96,000. Growing up at the top of 'de rode' we were always kicking a ball around. Sometimes a young Garda would come and ask us to stop playing - for our own safety! Mostly we played in the confined circular area of the weighing scale. 'The Scale', with its small patch of grass and back wall, was ideal for three in and three out. Skills were honed here. John Ryan modelled himself on Eusebio, the great Portuguese centre-forward. The real function of the scale was to weigh the loads carried by long distance lorry drivers. The scale was operated by Elizabeth and Eileen O'Donoghue, who resided at 29 Steele's Terrace.

Recently while reading the autobiography of Pele, I was amused to learn that the Brazil national team of 1970 employed a winning tactic they called 'The Avenue'. The influence of this magnificent Brazil team can never be underestimated. In 1970 goalposts with nets were erected

by enterprising youths at the Fair Green. The timber came from the old St. Joseph's hospital. Jacko McMahon, being the youngest of the Avenue lads hanging around the site, was sent down to ask one of the workmen about the timber. Jacko was politely told to "Fuck off". *What did he say?* the boys asked on his return. "*Take what ye want!*" Jacko replied!

The nets were acquired from fishermen in Castlegregory, Co. Kerry. Full-blooded games were staged in 'the Green'. I recall good displays from Michael O'Connor (Connors), a big effective centre-forward, John Butler and younger lads like Michael Connellan, Noel Maloney, Norman Kelly and Joe Carmody. The players weren't only from Marian Avenue. Many enthusiasts would show up from other parts of the town to get a game. These included Shane Barry, Eugene Judge, Jimmy Molloy, Christy Kierse, Michael Enright, Kieran Gibbons, Gerry 'Boots' Malone, Gerard 'Gaurus' Moloney (a fine keeper), John Lavery, Alan Lewis and Brian Sandford. Brian spent his summer holidays in Ennis. A native of Chester, he was - and still is - a huge Everton fan.

We in the avenue didn't play with any old ball, we had an official World Cup model which Mary Byrnes brought home from a trip to Spain in 1973.

The first time I heard of Cherry Orchard was when they came to play Lifford in the FAI Cup in march 1978. A good humoured Dublin crowd enjoyed the day at Our Lady's grounds and while Cherry Orchard were superior, the game hung in the balance for seventy minutes thanks to a spirited performance from the home side, a team that included Brendan Mounsey, Patrick Murphy, Leo Mannion and Jimmy Real. Cherry Orchard would later loom large in The Avenue story.

Then a meeting with a view to forming a new club was convened at Michael Kerin's bar, on 12th of April 1983. This historic gathering was chaired by Gerard 'Paddlers' O'Grady and a new club was founded under the agreed name of Avenue United. There were those who said "*Avenue won't last a wet week*" (no malice was intended). But last they did, becoming the first club ever to win the Haughey Cup three years in a row, and the only Clare club to contest the FAI Junior Cup final.

Ollie Byrnes, November 2007

*I think I'm going back to the things I learned so well in my youth.
I think I'm returning to those things when I was young enough to know the truth.
Now there are no games to only pass the time.
No more electric trains, no more trees to climb.*

Introduction to *The Avenue, From the Scale to Dalymount and Beyond* by Ollie Byrnes

*But thinking young and growing older is no sin.
And I can play the game of life to win.*

Words from the song '*Going Back*', written by Gerry Goffin\Carole King for '*Dusty Springfield*' (Mary O'Brien), and also for '*The Byrds*'. Both versions were very successful in 1966 and 1967 respectively. Carole King's own interpretation of the song can found on the album '*Pearls*'.