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The forgotten story of the humble Irish shooting star

FIFTY years ago this Christmas, Jimmy Greaves was in his pomp. In a golden era for the English game, Greaves was the ace poacher, a master in the art of putting the ball in the back of the net.

The Spurs marksman was expected to finish as the First Division's top scorer for the third season on the trot. His mission was complicated by the exploits of an unassuming individual from Bray who had no interest in the stardom that came with his profession.

This humility is a major reason that, outside of Wicklow, where the local junior league is named after him, Andy McEvoy is only remembered by the generation that watched him play. His legacy in the annals of Irish football should be stronger.

After all, we're now midway through a campaign where a few of our attackers are on fire. Daryl Murphy (Championship) and Eoin Doyle (League One) could finish as the main men at their level. But in the elite division, there is no contender. In fact, just two Irish strikers have ever finished a top flight season at the head of the charts. John Aldridge hit 26 for Liverpool en route to title joy in 1987/88, a fine tally.

HONOUR

However, it was McEvoy who blazed a trail in 1964/65, the first Match of the Day season. The Blackburn star registered 29 goals, matching Greaves' return, so they shared the honour. What makes it even more outstanding is that Rovers only finished 10th.

It was a significant Irish sporting achievement, yet the dearth of accessible information on his career through online channels leaves it in danger of being forgotten. During his hot streak, McEvoy was a phenomenon. In 1964, he scooped the Caltex (soon to be Texaco) Sportstar Award and an opinion piece in the *Irish Independent* had strongly argued his case ahead of a teenage star from Belfast.

"George Best is a young lad with a very bright future," wrote columnist Eddie Boyle, "But despite his wonderful football ability I don't think he has, as yet, reached world class. McEvoy undoubtedly has."

Similar to Best, McEvoy had complexities that marked him out from his peers. The difference is that he yearned for a quiet life. Two years after going toe to toe with Greaves, he was back in Ireland.

Last week, his good friend and former Irish colleague Alfie Hale explained that he bonded with McEvoy because they had a lot in common; they were two young,

Andy McEvoy with his wife Phil and son Andy Jnr



homesick men who never really wanted to be away in England.

It was the legendary Jackie Carey that invited the promising teenager to Blackburn. McEvoy, a childhood friend of another future Irish colleague Alan Kelly Snr, was spotted playing for Bray Wanderers.

Although he scored twice on his debut, he was a fringe operator at Blackburn until two games into the 1963/64 season when then manager Jack Marshall made the inspired move to switch McEvoy from right half to inside right.

He struck 32 goals in 37 games, his best ever tally, but three less than Greaves. Household names Roger Hunt and Denis Law were behind him. "I just happen to be in the right place at the right time," he told the *Irish Press*.

In Con Martin's Soccer Annual, he outlined his simple secret to success. "Don't shoot for the sake of shooting. Try and pick your spot in the goal and the further away from the goalkeeper the better."

Precision was his calling card. McEvoy was revered by team-mates who respected a player who was two-footed, well-balanced and had no trace of an ego. McEvoy was embarrassed by adulation. "He



Damien Duff with Ciaran Ryan at the launch of a memorial match for Andy McEvoy between Blackburn Rovers and Bray Wanderers in 2003

never sold himself at all," said Hale.

When he came back to represent Ireland, his routine centred around catching up with his folks in Bray - his dad, Lally, was an accomplished footballer - and then dropping into the Gresham for a few pints and scrambled eggs on toast, often carrying his boots in a plastic bag.

He scored six times in 17 Irish appearances, including a couple against Spain and a destruction of Poland which was greeted as evidence that he was finally bringing his club form to green.

That never quite happened. Hale

reckons that established members of the dressing room could not quite relate to McEvoy's belief that football was not the be-all-and-end-all. "They felt it was a lost opportunity," he muses.

After letting Blackburn know he wanted to go home, they consented in 1967 and sold him to Limerick for a small fee on the basis he would resign if he ever returned to the UK.

Then 29 he knew what he wanted. His wife, Phil, whom he met in England, hailed from Kilmihil, Co Clare, and they could live in the region. He accepted a solid job with

Guinness as a delivery driver which he balanced with his football.

He excelled for Limerick, winning an FAI Cup medal in 1971 even though work meant that he rarely trained. Boss Ewan Fenton couldn't leave him out, stressing that "he was so good, he should never have left English football."

McEvoy was satisfied. "He was always happiest after games sitting around having a beer and a chat with his mates," recalls Hale, who was on the opposite side when the skill merchant drew an ovation from all corners of a Waterford crowd with a superb 25-yard volley that is embedded in the memory bank of every spectator present.

The lengthy applause was the last thing he wanted and his response was to bow his head and trot back to the centre circle. This was typical. At training, it was noted that he enjoyed juggling the ball on his own but stopped once he realised there was an audience.

When his playing days ended, the family moved to Bray, and he worked in a warehouse for the ICI before managing Wanderers in the Leinster Senior League but, after being involved in their League of Ireland application, he stepped aside in the reshuffle that brought in Pat Devlin in 1985.

HANDY

After that, the father-of-four turned his attentions to the Wicklow Junior League, helping out with his old schoolboy club Glenview and Wolfe Tone Wanderers. His sons Brian and Andy Jnr were handy players; Brian had a League of Ireland spell with Bray and also spent a few seasons under Hale in Waterford.

They ended up with Glenview and Andy Jnr tells a story about the team retreating to the pub after a game to find that Blackburn, a new force driven by Alan Shearer, were on TV. A trivia question was posed, asking if viewers could name the last Blackburn player to be crowned as the league's leading scorer.

Knowing that he was the answer, McEvoy hid in the toilet to avoid the loud cheer when his name was called out. He never changed.

Sadly, he did not live to see Shearer emulate his feat. In May '94 aged just 55, he passed away after a short illness. Hale recalls a funeral that was in keeping with the man.

"There was no PR thing about it. It was held in a small little church in Bray, with a very homely crowd and it represented exactly what Andy was. Modest, quiet, very honest. There was no emphasising the fact he was a great footballer."

He was a great footballer, though, and half a century on from his finest hour, it's important that the tale of Andy McEvoy is preserved.