

## Domestic Soccer's Woes Not Down to 'Foreign' Fans



The Shamrock Rovers/Liverpool friendly has whipped up a massive debate about the nature of soccer support in this country.

Were the 42,000, or to be precise, the 37,000 Liverpool supporters who attended the recent friendly against Shamrock Rovers at Lansdowne Road "morons" as Dermot Keely put it on RTE's 'Soccer Republic'? In the greater scheme of things, probably not.

After all, couldn't one make exactly the same accusation about those who attend big concerts at the O2 and choose not to attend gigs or concerts in their local theatre or arts centre featuring indigenous talent? What about freedom of choice?

If you're born in Waterford and you love soccer, then by Dermot Keely's definition, he cannot understand why you don't support Waterford United.

But to suggest you should automatically support the club in the area you're born in is a purely idealistic notion - not everyone in Waterford automatically follows our senior intercounty GAA teams.

Just look at National League gates for proof of that, even if, by contrast, the hurling matches at Walsh Park drew in gates that most League of Ireland clubs can sadly only dream about. As a child who grew up in the 80s, I was fortunate enough to see Waterford United take on Bordeaux (featuring Jean Tigana) on a famous European night at a packed Kilcohan Park.

To see my local team take on a side featuring some great continental talent (managed by future World Cup winner Aime Jacquet) was an absolute thrill, and it's sad that we've had no such big competitive occasion like that in the following 28 years.

On many a Sunday afternoon, my father brought my brothers and I to Kilcohan to see the Blues in action, and whenever mighty Shamrock Rovers were in town, the atmosphere always had an additional edge. That was always the case when your team played the best.

The first pair of football boots I ever bought with my own money were sold to me by Alfie Hale in his shop on The Quay when I was seven years old. I'll never forget the excitement of having one of the all-time greats helping me pick out those boots. It was a huge thrill.

We wore our Waterford United jerseys – both home and away – with pride, and we saw the club win the First Division in 1990 under Johnny Matthews' management.

A few months later, Manchester United, fresh from their FA Cup win over Crystal Palace, travelled to Kilcohan, and I was delighted to see both of 'my' teams playing each other.

United's 1983 FA Cup win over Brighton swung it for me when it came to supporting the Red Devils. My eldest sibling's influence and the heavy Irish presence at United at the time certainly helped too, but my interest in both clubs growing up was equally keen.

My match-going has been limited in recent seasons given the nature of my workload and other responsibilities, and if the summer calendar was scrapped (as it should be in my view as it's not brought the crowds in), I know I'd definitely get to more Blues games.

The product has suffered in recent years, the standard of the game has certainly dropped a few notches at Premier Division level and the First Division is practically invisible from a publicity and marketing perspective.

But to blame someone who supports an English team for the regression of our domestic game doesn't stack up in my view. Morons they most certainly are not.