



Green Milestone

Northern Ireland manager Michael O'Neill's vision for his country's first major tournament in 30 years

Words **Amit Katwala** Photography **Tom Watkins**

After steering his side to their 12th game unbeaten thanks to a 0-0 draw in Slovakia last weekend, Michael O'Neill's Northern Ireland have the longest undefeated run of any side at Euro 2016.

No mean feat, given England's final group-stage foes stunned Germany 3-1 away in their previous warm-up game. Northern Ireland, too, face the world champions

in Group C, after they meet Poland on Sunday in Nice, and Ukraine in Lyon next Thursday. O'Neill tells us he is confident his side have the stubborn quality to progress.

The previous tournament your country qualified for was the 1986 World Cup...
"It means so much. When you're always on the outside looking in, there becomes

a bit of an inevitability about it. I think people just thought: 'This is never going to happen.' So when it does happen, the reaction to it is euphoric. And for the players, there are so many who've played such a long time - Aaron Hughes has been playing international football for 18 years."

You have a small pool of professional players – only around 40 – does that limit what you can do tactically?

"Very much. I've at times played with three at the back and it has been driven by that factor. It's a situation where we don't really have a natural left-back playing at a high level. A lot of our lads who play in the Football League - they have to step up when it comes to international football, and many of them have done. But it does drive your thought process a little bit."

Some players haven't had much game time this season – particularly Kyle Lafferty, your top scorer in qualifying. He started only four club games.

"Yeah Kyle's situation is a worry. The loan [to Birmingham] didn't happen early in the season, it didn't happen in January and by the time he went on loan he probably wasn't physically in an ideal situation to ☺

go in and have the impact he could have had. Hopefully it will work in our favour - maybe there's a freshness element that he will have, so he can bring his best game."

The other problem you have is players choosing to play for the Republic of Ireland. What steps have you taken to try and address that?

"There's nothing we can do from a legal standpoint. That process has come and gone - the rule is what it is. Any player born in Northern Ireland has the right to

There's obviously a difference in resources - how does your working week look compared to, say, Roy Hodgson's?

"It's the same for us all. You can see how players are performing or, if there's no games on, you can watch footage. I typically don't pick players based on what's happening at their clubs at times. And, for example, there's not a huge amount of point in me going and watching Steven Davis or Jonny Evans on a regular basis because I'm going to pick them.

It must be frustrating if you travel to a game and the player you wanted to see doesn't play?

"That's happened on more than one occasion. I went to England on a weekend and watched three games, but only two of the players I went to see played, and unfortunately they were both taken off after half-time. So it was a fruitless weekend, but you get used to dealing with that."

Your route into management was slightly unusual in that you spent a while working in financial services - any transferable skills?

"A real job [laughs]. I think it was important for me. There are a lot of similarities - you're still dealing with people. A big part of management is communication. It's being able to stand up in front of a group of people and get your message across. The football side isn't the difficult side for a lot of ex-players. It's communication, speaking in front of the group, and the IT skills. A big part of football now is dealing with the people who are above you - boards of directors, and a lot of players go through their career never having to do that."

What will you say to the players before their country's first major tournament game for 30 years?

"You've almost answered it in the question. So many players have played so long to get this opportunity. Don't let it pass you by; don't waste it. It's almost like the player who gets to one cup final in his whole career. We have to embrace it and not have a fear of it."

Do you have a target for what you'd like to achieve in France?

"The first thing is to be competitive. If we weren't to qualify from the group, I don't think we could be deemed as failure. But, equally, we've maybe surprised people and surprised ourselves that we go there as [qualifying] group winners. We want to continue to do that - we're 12 games unbeaten and ranked 25th in the world."

Will you employ the Greece 2004 and Leicester model of being hard to beat and grabbing goals where you can?

"Yeah, totally. We don't have the individual players to play in another way. We have to be difficult to beat, work harder than the other team, be better off the ball than the other team and be very strong at set-pieces for and against. My players have to look at this tournament as the biggest shop window of their careers - hopefully they'll respond to that."

Some bookies have you at 250/1 to win the Euros, making you 20 times more likely to lift the trophy than Leicester were to win the Premier League.

"Nailed on! [Laughing] I think that's generous. That's kind to us." ●

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play for the Republic of Ireland, so we just have to manage that. We've built a system where we're working with the best players in Northern Ireland from a very young age, so hopefully that will build a loyalty."

Having qualified for the Euros will presumably help with that in future?

"Well, that's right. I watched the 1982 and 1986 World Cups, so I dreamed of playing for Northern Ireland. And hopefully, with the tournament in France, the young players we have will feel the same."

Where I'm always trying to find an angle is: are there players out there who might be available for Northern Ireland, who have a bloodline for Northern Ireland?"

You must spend many hours on the road.

"Totally, yeah. The other weekend is a good example. I was at Blackburn, made it across to Accrington to watch some of our young players and then I went to Wigan on the Sunday. Sometimes the early part of your week is plotting where you're going to go at the weekend."