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The Irish brawn drain: English League clubs and Irish footballers,  
1946-1995<sup>1</sup>

Patrick McGovern  
Department of Sociology,  
London School of Economics & Political Science  
Houghton Street,  
London WC2 2AE

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## ABSTRACT

This paper draws on world systems and resource dependency theories to show how the changing recruitment practices of English League clubs have deepened the brawn drain from Irish football, thereby compounding its underdevelopment. An analysis of the origins, method of recruitment and destinations of Irish players (North and South) who appeared in the English League between 1946 and 1995 shows that English clubs imported large numbers of Irish players throughout the second half of the twentieth century. However, it was the inclusion of Irish teenagers within the youth policies of the largest clubs in the period after the 1970s that marked a break from the traditional pattern of buyer-supplier relations. Instead of continuing to purchase players who had established reputations within the Irish leagues, English clubs began to hire the most promising schoolboys before they joined Irish sides. As this practice spread, it eventually eliminated a valuable source of income: the selling of players to English clubs. Despite this development it would, however, be inappropriate to view the relationship between the Irish and English football industries as a simple zero sum game as Irish clubs benefit from employing highly trained young players who return home after failing to establish careers in England.

**Keywords:** brawn drain; association football; labour; recruitment.

## INTRODUCTION

Irish professional footballers are a highly visible, yet curiously under-researched, part of the Irish emigration phenomenon. This is all the more remarkable because they have been part of a brawn drain that has lasted for more than a century. According to Bale (1991), the brawn drain is a process in which the athletic and sporting talent of lesser-developed countries is siphoned off by colleges and professional teams from more economically advanced nations. In this case, it is Irish footballers that have been siphoned off by professional teams in the English League.<sup>2</sup> Though there is a long tradition of Irish athletes<sup>3</sup> and boxers emigrating in order to take up careers in professional sport, the numbers involved are relatively small when compared to those who have left to play professional football. This is probably because the national leagues (North and South) have been unable to provide significant amounts of full-time employment, though association football (or soccer) has long since been one of the more popular sports on the island of Ireland (Sugden and Bairner 1993). While these migrant players receive a remarkable degree of coverage in the Irish mass media and, to a lesser extent, in the English equivalent, they have generally been ignored in studies of sports labour migration and of Irish emigration.

This paper seeks to overcome this deficiency by analysing the overall structure of the Irish brawn drain.<sup>4</sup> In doing so, it will draw upon world systems and resource dependency theories to show how the brawn drain was created, and subsequently extended, during the second half of the twentieth century. More specifically, I shall argue that the recent spread of youth policies among the major English clubs has placed additional constraints on the development of the football industry within Ireland.

## CORE - PERIPHERY RELATIONS AND LABOUR MIGRATION

The most influential accounts of sport labour migration are derived from world systems theory (Wallerstein 1974) and from the neo-marxist dependency theory (Cardoso and Faletto 1979). Though these contain some major flaws (Hettne 1983) I would argue that they provide a useful starting point for the analysis of uneven economic development in those cases where industries compete for the same resources on a cross-national basis. This is primarily because they seek to relate rates of development to international exchanges between nationally based industries, rather than simply referring to their internal production arrangements. The emphasis on trade and exchange is important because the primary aim of this paper is to

explain how a particular pattern of inter-industry relations, that is between the football industries of Ireland and England, inhibit development within Ireland. As Maguire and Bale (1994: 11-12) argue, 'the reason why Hungary loses its best footballers and why Kenya loses its best runners cannot be explained by events in those specific countries'.

Sociologists and geographers who draw on this tradition claim that the organizations at the core of the global sports system tend to dominate the sports audiences and labour markets of the periphery (Arbena 1994; Bale and Sang 1994; Klein 1989; Maguire and Bale 1994). This generally occurs in three ways. First, the commodification and globalization of sport are driven by transnational organizations that have the power to generate wealth at the expense of clubs in the periphery. For example, major media corporations are able to encourage spectators in the periphery to watch satellite broadcasts of 'live' sporting events from major European leagues at the expense of less glamorous versions on offer at local stadia. Second, the appeal and, ultimately, the domination of the core leagues are enhanced by their ability to attract athletic talent from across the globe. This inevitably leads to the deskilling of the world's minor leagues. In addition, the presence of foreign stars adds to the appeal of satellite broadcasts for audiences in the (semi-) periphery who may prefer to watch their compatriots playing overseas on TV rather than in the local stadia. Finally, the countries and regions of the periphery are excluded from the centre of decision-making in global sports and are, as a consequence, unable to change these processes of domination. They must instead depend on whatever financial support is channelled in their direction from the international sporting authorities. Perhaps the most controversial claim advanced by writers within this perspective is that little genuine development is possible while this pattern of relations is in place. That which does occur is termed dependent development because it is constrained by unequal exchanges with the developed core (Maguire and Bale 1994).

Empirical support for these claims can be found in studies of sport in Latin America and Africa. Arbena (1994), for example, in his examination of the migration of soccer players from Latin America to Europe, finds that a recruitment relationship has developed between various South American countries and wealthy European clubs, principally in Spain and Italy. These are able to extract the best players from Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay by offering significantly higher salaries than those available locally. The clubs in these countries are, in any case, frequently forced to sell their best young players in order to survive. The result is that the subsequent standard of play, the match attendances and the gate receipts decline, with

the result that it becomes even more difficult for clubs to survive without selling their best players.

Similar experiences have been observed in the Dominican Republic where local fans have watched US and Japanese franchises sign up most of the top baseball players (Klein 1989, 1991). Some of these franchises, such as the Toronto Blue Jays and Los Angeles Dodgers, have taken the additional step of establishing academies in the Dominican Republic to locate, sign, and refine talent before sending it to North America for further development.

### *Uneven Development and Resource Dependency*

It should be emphasized that this research is only concerned with the link between the recruitment practices of English clubs and the uneven development of the football industry in England and Ireland. A full assessment of the underdevelopment of Irish football would require consideration of a range of factors beyond the scope of this study. These would include the split between the southern and northern clubs in the 1920s, the management and organizational capabilities of the respective football associations,<sup>5</sup> the negative impact of satellite broadcasts of English football on attendances in Ireland, as well as competition from other sports for players and spectators. The Irish League (Northern Ireland) has also suffered from repeated outbreaks of sectarian violence notably since the 'troubles' emerged in the late 1960s (Sugden and Bairner 1993; Brodie 1980). Once it is accepted that these factors have had an influence then the underdevelopment of Irish football cannot be attributed wholly to the English League's status as a buyer and the Irish leagues' status as sellers of labour.

Nevertheless, my argument is that the loss of skilled labour has constrained the development of Irish football, thereby reinforcing its subordinate status in relation to the English football industry. There are two strands to this thesis. First, professional football is unusual, even among labour intensive industries, in that the economic and sporting success is based entirely on its employees. The fact that labour is of critical importance to a club's performance is not in itself the source of the problem (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978: 47). The problem only arises when teams are unable to hire, or retain, the best available footballers because other clubs possess greater economic power. In this particular instance, the problem is compounded by the fact that the other clubs are part of a different and wealthier league.

The second part of this argument, which concerns the subordinate position held by the Irish leagues, points to growing differences in economic power. My argument is that these

differences have placed further constraints on the growth of football as a commercial industry within Ireland. This development may be fruitfully analysed through Pfeffer and Salancik's (1978) influential resource dependency theory of inter-organizational relations. Though Pfeffer and Salancik's model has different aims and orientations to neo-marxist dependency theory (e.g. Cardoso and Faletto 1979) it is similar in that it shares a relational concept of power, as well as the belief that power relations may be inextricably linked to those of dependency. Pfeffer and Salancik's basic claim is that organizations are not autonomous, or self-directed, because they are involved in various forms of interdependencies with their environments. They argue that organizations must acquire resources (e.g., finance, labour) from the external environment in order to survive. Since these resources frequently come from other organizations the focal organization may become dependent on those external organizations that can provide them with the necessary resources. Such dependence leads to the external organizations exerting some constraint or control over those who depend upon them (see also Pfeffer 1987).

In relation to inter-organizational relations between English and Irish football clubs, the starting point is that the English League constantly needs new players while Irish clubs usually need to sell in order to survive. For example, the sale of Paul McGrath to Manchester United in 1982 provided St Patrick's Athletic with £30,000, which was promptly used to clear a number of major debts (Dervan 1994). The problem for Irish clubs is that Ireland is but one source of new players for English clubs while it is the only source for Irish clubs.<sup>6</sup> English football has, for example, a long tradition of recruiting players from Scotland (Moorhouse 1994) as well as from within its own jurisdiction. Other new sources, such as Australia and Scandinavia, have also emerged since the 1970s. The choice of sources available to English teams means that transfers between Irish and English clubs are not of equal importance to both sides. Consequently, Irish clubs are unable to exert much control over their English counterparts though they may control access to Irish players. If anything, the balance of power lies in the other direction once it is accepted that Irish clubs need the income from transfer fees more than English clubs need to buy Irish players.

This asymmetry in market relations is compounded by the fact that Irish players are generally eager to sign for English sides because they offer better economic and sporting opportunities (Brady 1980; Dervan 1994; Stapleton 1991). By contrast, clubs in Northern Ireland and in the Irish Republic can only survive by employing part-time and amateur players

though some occasionally employ a small number of full-time professionals (Brodie 1980; Hannigan 1998). Despite these qualifications, Irish clubs are able to retain some degree of bargaining power over transfer fees, provided they are able to control access to Irish players.

In order to understand how the brawn drain has changed I shall first describe the overall scale of this phenomenon before explaining how changes in recruitment methods have transformed relations between the Irish and English football industries. I shall then concentrate on the recruitment activities of the largest English clubs because they have led the brawn drain from its earliest days.

## DATA AND METHODS

The empirical data for this research was assembled from a diverse range of published secondary sources. Information on footballers from Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic who have appeared in the English League was taken from Hugman's (1992) *English League Players Records 1946-92*. I would like to emphasize here that while migration from Northern Ireland to England is essentially a form of internal migration within the United Kingdom I have, nevertheless, included it in this analysis precisely because it has had a league of its own (the Irish League). This data was updated to the 1995-96 season using various editions of *Rothman's Football Yearbook*. Hugman (1992) lists, among other things, each player's place of birth, date of birth, form of recruitment (transfer or apprentice), year of recruitment, and the names of the clubs that employed them in Ireland (where relevant) and in England. Players who were employed on a non-contract, or loan, basis were excluded, as were those who had a contract but never actually appeared for the first team.

Place of birth was used as the initial selection criterion (e.g., Belfast, Dublin). This variable initially contained a small element of bias, as it did not account for the possibility that the player, or his family, may have emigrated to England before he became a professional footballer. Similarly, the families of some players who were born in England may have emigrated to Ireland. To address this problem, the information on place of birth was compared with those contained in biographies of international players (Brodie 1980; Cullen 1993; McGarrigle 1996). Since this exercise only produced a minor reduction in the overall number of Irish players I am confident that this information is reasonably reliable (less than five per cent of the cases had to be re-classified).



Having identified the initial employing club, two additional variables were created to describe the divisional status and size of each club at the time it signed any Irish player. While the data on divisional status were obtained directly from Robinson (1998), I had to use the average home attendance figures for each season as an indicator of club size (Tabner 1992; *Rothman's Football Yearbooks* 1991-1995). The advantage of attendance figures is that they give an estimation of club income for a period in which this was mostly based on gate receipts. However, the disadvantage is that they do not capture the additional purchasing power provided by wealthy directors or owners. Given that most clubs were either promoted or relegated during the course of this period, the process of data coding also became even more painstaking as the size categories tended to change according to the clubs' success or failure. Nevertheless, clubs were initially ranked in descending order for each season, using their average home attendance figures, before dividing them into roughly equal numbers of large, medium, and small.

The overall result is a unique database containing nominal and ordinal level data on the entire population of Irish players (North and South) who made at least one appearance in the English leagues between 1946 and 1995. This material was supplemented by journalists' accounts of the 'Irish connection' with two of England's leading clubs, namely Arsenal (McGarrigle 1991) and Manchester United (McGarrigle 1990; Scally 1998). Special attention is paid to the practices of these clubs because they imported the most Irish players.

#### THE CONSTANT FLOW

Overall, a total of 563 Irish players have appeared in the English league since the end of the Second World War (Table I). While this figure may not appear very large when spread over a 50-year period it worth noting that only Scotland has supplied more players to English football (McGovern 1999). Furthermore, soccer has always attracted fewer players and spectators in Ireland than the Gaelic games of hurling and football (Cronin 1999; Sugden and Bairner 1993). More significantly, this figure does not represent the total outflow, as not all of those who were signed by English clubs succeeded in appearing for the first team (Hannigan 1998). It also excludes those who were signed by Scottish clubs (Moorhouse 1986: 257).

**Table I.** *Irish signings by English League clubs, 1946-1995*

Years (ten)	N. Ireland	Irish Republic
1946-55	29.7 (88)	31.8 (85)
1956-65	23.3 (69)	14.2 (38)
1966-75	19.3 (57)	16.1 (43)
1976-85	16.2 (48)	12.4 (33)
1986-95	11.5 (34)	25.5 (68)
<i>Total</i>	100 (296)	100 (267)

Note: Chi-square = 23.673; df=4; p<.005

The largest outflow of players from Ireland occurred during the years immediately after the Second World War when the English League recommenced. More Irish players were hired in this period (1946-55) than at any time subsequently (Table I). Though the Irish leagues had already supplied many players to English clubs before the War the amount exported immediately after the War was exceptional. Much of this may be explained by a post-war labour shortage, the rapid expansion of the League in the years immediately after the War, and by the effects of the conflict itself. Some 75 professional footballers were killed in action (Russell 1997: 124) and an unknown number of others were injured. It is also likely that a significant number of those who would otherwise have become footballers may have been killed or injured. English clubs may also have been attracted to Irish players because their fitness levels and skills had been maintained by playing in leagues that had continued throughout the War.

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of the Irish brawn drain has been the unrelenting nature of the outward flow. English clubs have imported players from Ireland during every season since 1946.<sup>7</sup> The level of recruitment activity has also remained fairly stable with approximately 10 players hired each year, after the initial period of mass recruitment between 1946 and 1955. There have, however, been considerable changes over time in the numbers hired from Northern Ireland and from the Irish Republic. Apart from the period 1946-55 when similar numbers of players were imported from the North and South, considerably more of the players came from Northern Ireland in the period up to the mid-1980s. Thereafter, the proportion of Northern Irish signings declined steadily (from 29.7 per cent in 1946-55 to 11.5 per cent in 1986-95) while that of the Irish Republic initially declined before rising again,

notably from the mid-1980s. Since then, almost twice as many players have been recruited directly from the Irish Republic (Table I).

This development probably reflects the growth of the game in the Republic in an era when the national team enjoyed unprecedented success under its English manager, Jack Charlton (Cronin 1999: 129-142; Hannigan 1998: 20-28). Qualification for the European Championship Finals in 1988, followed by World Cups in 1990 and 1994 led to an outpouring of fervour for a game that had previously aroused hostility among cultural nationalists. Significantly, the number of registered players grew dramatically from approximately 65,000 players in 1986 to 175,320 in 1995 with some 50,000 having been added in the last five years of this period (*Irish Times* 1.6.1996). Nevertheless, the overall decline in transfers, particularly from Northern Ireland, may also indicate a relative decline in skill levels when compared with the increase in players signed from Scandinavia and Australia (McGovern 1999).

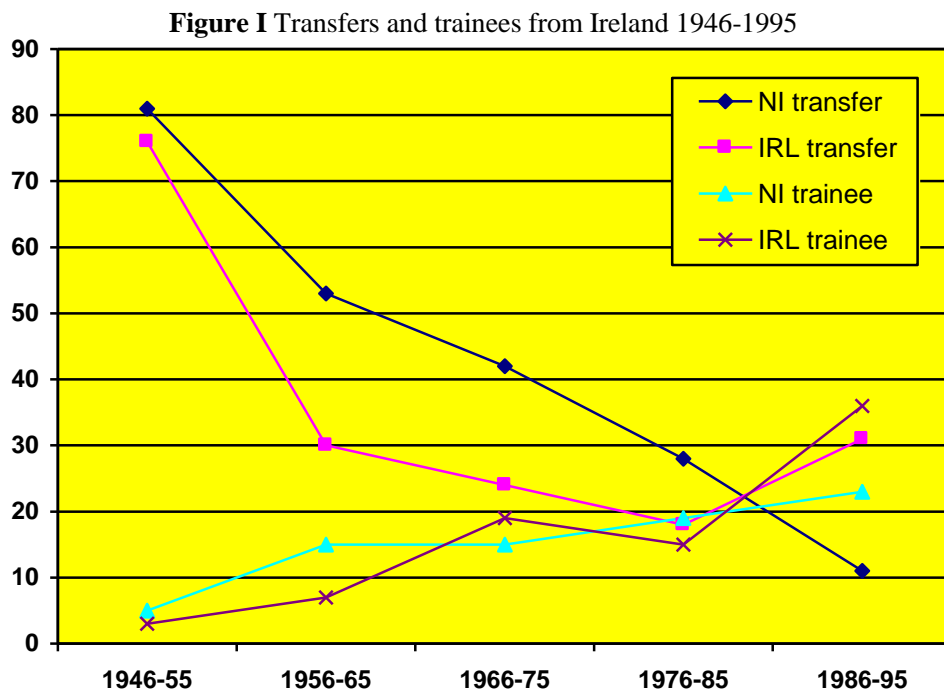
Finally, it is worth noting that the consistency and durability of this outward flow, and the urban origins of those involved, contrasts sharply with the general characteristics of Irish emigration to Britain. In general, Irish emigration is strongly influenced by how the Irish labour market performs in relation to that of Britain, especially in comparisons of after-tax wages and unemployment rates (NESC 1991: 111-124). Accordingly, emigration tends to increase during periods of economic stagnation and decrease during relatively periods of economic growth. By contrast, the migration of footballers, which is determined by the amount of direct recruitment undertaken by English employers, has remained remarkably stable in terms of direction and volume for most of the late twentieth century. Consequently, the Irish experience of immigration during the prosperous years of the 1970s and the 1990s was not matched by a reversal, or even a decline, in the brawn drain.

Furthermore, the urban and predominantly east coast origins of football migrants (e.g., Belfast, Derry, Dublin and Cork) differs from that of ordinary emigrants. The latter have typically consisted of a mixture of urban and rural with relatively higher proportions from rural communities along the western seaboard (NESC 1991: 75-77; MacLaughlin 1994: 50). This is not surprising once it is appreciated that soccer has traditionally been an urban phenomenon in Ireland, with Dublin and Belfast as its leading strongholds.

## CHANGES IN RECRUITMENT PRACTICES

Until the 1980s, most Irish players were purchased from Irish League and League of Ireland clubs, though a growing number of Irish apprentices were beginning to appear for English sides. Under the so-called retain and transfer system Irish clubs receive a transfer fee after the player has separately agreed the terms and conditions of his employment. Under the trainee (previously apprenticeship) method, Irish-based scouts invite talented schoolboy players to England for trials. Those that impress are offered an opportunity to join the club as an apprentice and paid accordingly.<sup>8</sup> A significant feature of this method is that no transfer fees are required since those involved are too young to be employed as part-time professionals by Irish sides.

The mid-1980s marks a watershed in buyer-supplier relations between the Irish and English leagues because it was the first time that those recruited as apprentices outnumbered those recruited as transfers (Figure I). This event might have been expected, as it was the outcome of a trend that had been developing steadily over a 30-year period. In each of the previous decades, there was evidence that increasing numbers of Irish players were being hired through the trainee system. For instance, the number of trainees increased from a total of 8 (5 NI and 3 IRL) in 1946-55 to 59 (23 NI and 36 IRL) in 1986-95 while transfers declined from 157 to 42 over the same period.



The rise in the number of trainees was primarily the result of a strategic decision taken by some leading English clubs to invest in scouting and nursery-style arrangements. Prior to the 1980s most scouts were unpaid enthusiasts or ex-players who had informal relationships with particular clubs. Such relationships were gradually replaced by more formal arrangements, some of which included employment on a part-time basis. One of the most well-known is Pat Devlin, a former League of Ireland player and manager of a League of Ireland club. In his scouting capacity he has procured dozens of trialists, numerous apprentices and more than a few successful players for Liverpool, Blackburn Rovers and Newcastle United. Devlin's view, like that of other scouts, is that he is offering opportunities to teenagers that simply do not exist in Ireland: 'We're hypocrites in this country, we have a national league, and a national association, and yet, we're sending our best players away all the time. But how can we say that they shouldn't go? What have we got to offer them here?' (quoted in Hannigan 1998: 82).

In addition to networks of scouts, some of the major English clubs also began to organize coaching schools in Belfast and Dublin in the late 1980s. Manchester United, for example, introduced a School of Excellence to Belfast while Everton entered into a sponsorship arrangement with the Dublin amateur club Home Farm. The latter arrangement allowed Everton to have first choice over the young talent discovered by one of Ireland's leading nursery clubs. Similarly, one of Liam Brady's first acts on being appointed Director of Youth Development at Arsenal was to establish a formal link with the Dublin and District Schoolboy's League (Hannigan 1998: 27). Brady, a former Arsenal, Juventus and Republic of Ireland star had himself played in the same schoolboy league before being signed as an apprentice by Arsenal. Even Tranmere Rovers, a medium sized club, established a nursery arrangement with a Dublin boy's club, Stella Maris, by using the local connections of their manager, John Aldridge, a former Irish international (Hannigan 1998: 27). Other clubs have also begun discussions with Irish youth sides about similar arrangements. These practices enable clubs to monitor potential players as they enter their teens, that is, before they can be legally signed as trainees at the age of fifteen years. Keith Gillespie, for example, started travelling from Belfast to Manchester United at the age of twelve years (*Observer* 19.2.1995).

These measures, which form part of a widely publicized investment in youth policies by leading English clubs (*FourFourTwo*, February 1995; *Guardian* 1.12.1999), can be

interpreted as a shift from a market-based solution to the problem of finding skilled labour towards one based on internal hierarchical arrangements (McGovern 1999). The principal advantages of this approach are that it enables employers to procure skills in an industry that is characterized by skill shortages at the highest level while simultaneously providing a much greater degree of control over labour quality than under the transfer system. The fact that English clubs are producing an increasing proportion of players in this way suggests that they have simply adopted a rational response to the problem of procuring scarce resources at relatively low costs. What is of particular interest to this study is that practices that were developed within an English context have been extended across the Irish Sea.

In short, the activities of the schools and scouts have the same effect as those of the baseball academies in the Dominican Republic (Klein 1991): they locate and remove the finest natural resources from the local environment and send them to one where they can enjoy greater economic and sporting opportunities.

#### THE RECRUITING CLUBS

Much of the recruitment activity was undertaken by the better supported and richer clubs based in the major cities of London, Birmingham, Liverpool and Manchester. This group of approximately 30 clubs has enjoyed some of the highest average attendance figures for all league clubs and lengthy membership of the first division (or Premiership after 1992).<sup>9</sup> For instance, they imported more than half (58.8 per cent) of all players between 1946 and 1995. The top 10, which hired one-third (34.3 per cent) of all Irish players, contains some of the current (and a few former) powerhouses of English football: Manchester United, Arsenal, Middlesbrough, Sunderland, Brighton & Hove Albion, Burnley, Leeds United, Doncaster Rovers, Luton Town and Wolverhampton Wanderers.

The significance of club size (and divisional status) is even more apparent in the difficult process of finding talented apprentices. Though the largest clubs only accounted for half (54.6 per cent) of all transfers they hired more than two-thirds (69.5 per cent) of all apprentices (Table II). They also showed a distinct tendency to recruit a larger percentage of their Irish players as trainees (33.6 per cent) than either the medium (18.8 per cent) or small (27.4 per cent) sized clubs. By 1995 the clubs in the two top divisions had not only bought more Irish players (75.2 per cent) they had also produced the vast majority (84.7 per cent) of apprentices.

First division clubs alone had signed just under half (43.7 per cent) of the transfers and more than half (56.7 per cent) of the apprentices.

**Table II.** *Method of recruitment by club size 1946-1995*

<i>Club size</i>	<i>Source type</i>	
	<i>Transfers</i>	<i>Trainees</i>
Large	54.6 (215)	69.5 (109)
Medium	34.0 (134)	19.7 (31)
Small	11.4 (45)	10.8 (17)
<i>Total</i>	100.0 (394)	100.0 (157)

Note: Chi-square=11.879; df=2; p<.005

The influence of club size is reinforced by evidence of increasing concentration of Irish recruitment activity, at least until the foundation of the Premiership in the early 1990s. After the first ten years the total number of clubs that imported Irish players declined slightly before rising again to half of all league clubs in 1986-95 (Table III). However, the percentage signed by the 10 leading recruiters in each period increased for the first thirty years (from 43.3 per cent in 1946-55 to 54.2 per cent in 1976-85) before declining in the final ten years (to 41 per cent). Since a similar trend is reflected for transfers this shows that recruitment had become increasingly concentrated among the largest clubs, until they started importing players from Scandinavia, Northern Europe, Canada and Australia after the early 1990s (McGovern 1999). The apprentice method was, by contrast, highly concentrated among the top 10 clubs for the first thirty years after the War though the numbers involved were initially quite small. Though it has fallen since the 1970s, the proportion was still close to half of all trainees by 1995 (45.8 per cent).

**Table III** *Concentration of Irish recruitment among English clubs 1946-95*

<i>Years</i>	<i>Proportion of all clubs</i>	<i>Top ten clubs</i>	<i>Transfers by top ten clubs</i>	<i>Trainees by top ten clubs</i>
1946-55	58.7*(54)	43.3 (75)	43.3 (68)	62.5 (5)
1956-65	52.2 (48)	54.3 (58)	52.8 (44)	63.5 (14)
1966-75	45.6 (42)	55.0 (55)	51.4 (34)	61.6 (21)
1976-85	40.2 (37)	54.2 (44)	56.3 (28)	52.9 (18)
1986-95	50.0 (46)	41.0 (41)	31.0 (15)	45.8 (26)

Note: \*This percentage is an underestimate as it is based on a total of 92 clubs. There were only 88 clubs in the league from 1946-50.

Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that the recruitment of Irish players was not simply the work of a select group of leading clubs. Despite the degree of concentration among the leading clubs, the top 20 recruiting clubs for the entire period between 1946 and 1995 only accounted for little more than half (55.1 per cent) of all Irish signings. A further indicator of the scale of the brain drain is the proportion of English clubs that signed players directly from Ireland. Significantly, virtually all of the clubs that appeared in the English leagues since 1946 have done so (95 out of 98). In other words, Ireland is so well established as a source of players that almost all league clubs have imported Irish players at some stage in their history. Furthermore, half (50.0 per cent) continued to do so at the end of this period.

#### *Manchester United and Arsenal*

Two of the largest Premiership (first division) clubs, Manchester United and Arsenal, stand out for their exceptional tendency to sign Irish footballers. They have, for instance, been the leading importers of Irish players (68 players or 12 per cent of the total) in general and, within that, the leading producers of Irish trainees (33 trainees or 21 per cent of the total). Manchester United was also among the first clubs to develop a youth policy within Britain and in the 1960s it became the first to incorporate Irish teenagers into these arrangements (Dunphy 1991: 280-81). However, the best indicator of Arsenal and Manchester United's long-standing attraction to Irish sources is that they were the only two clubs among the top



ten destinations for Irish players in each decade since 1946. Since both clearly have a well-established tradition for importing Irish players, it is worth examining their practices in detail.

The strength of the 'Irish connection' at these clubs has been documented by McGarrigle (1990; 1991) and Scally (1998) in fan oriented publications that describe the various Irish players, managers and scouts employed by these clubs. These reveal that both were among the first to appoint talent scouts in Ireland. According to McGarrigle (1990), the Manchester United connection can be traced back to the 1930s when the then manager Scott Duncan began to visit Ireland for representation games involving the United's Belfast-born player, Walter MacMillen. The club later appointed two scouts in the 1960s, Bob Harper (later Bob Bishop) for Northern Ireland and Billy Behan for the Republic. These scouts sent 'scores of hopefuls' to Manchester as well as such stars as Johnny Carey, Johnny Giles, Paul McGrath, George Best, Sammy McIlroy and Norman Whiteside. However, McGarrigle (1991: 134) claims that it is Arsenal who has established the most formidable scouting network in Ireland. While the club has, like Manchester United, one scout in Northern Ireland its chief scout in the Republic is supported by a team of five. It has, as indicated earlier, also formed nursery style links with Dublin schoolboy leagues.

The success of Arsenal's youth training scheme is illustrated by the source and low cost of those recruited since 1970 (Appendix 1). This shows that Arsenal relied heavily on the apprentice method while the Manchester club was much more inclined to buy established, older players from Irish league clubs. Consequently, Arsenal's extensive use of the apprenticeship system enabled them to recruit Irish teenagers at a very low cost while Manchester United have had to pay a number of transfer fees. Even so, these fees look extremely modest when compared to the record-breaking transfer fees that this club paid out during the same period (e.g., Bryan Robson £1.3 million, Roy Keane £3.75 million, Andy Cole £7 million). Given that these are two of the major employers of Irish players, this suggests that Irish footballers have been recruited rather cheaply.<sup>10</sup> Such a claim would be consistent with existing research on sport labour migration which shows that the donor leagues from the developing world generally act as a cheap source of sporting talent for clubs from the more economically developed parts of the world (Klein 1991; Maguire and Bale 1994).<sup>11</sup>

Social ties and recruitment networks, such as those that created the 'Irish connection' at these two clubs, are not unusual in determining how, and where, emigrants find employment (Portes 1995; Tilly and Tilly 1998: 190-94). Corcoran (1993), for instance, has shown how

the presence of friends, relatives or people of similar ethnic origins all influence the destinations chosen by Irish emigrants, as well as their subsequent chances of procuring employment. Critically, once such links are established they are likely to sustain themselves (Tilly and Tilly 1998: 190). In this case, the phenomenon is probably reinforced by two related factors.

First, a tradition of employing Irish players produces a ‘demonstration effect’ that is likely to attract other Irish hopefuls. Newcomers may, for example, be comforted by the knowledge that other young Irish footballers have already been given the opportunity to play first team football at these clubs. From the employer’s perspective, the manager and coaching staff will be reassured by the knowledge that players from similar backgrounds have proved successful in the past. Second, the presence of other Irish players makes it easier for apprentices to adapt to their surroundings. Former Arsenal stars, Liam Brady and Frank Stapleton, and Manchester United’s Paul McGrath have all acknowledged how the company of senior Irish professionals acted to provide a ‘home from home’ (Brady 1980; Stapleton 1991; Scally 1998: 119). The corollary is that these clubs were able to retain young, homesick, employees who may never previously have travelled outside their native country. In short, the reputation which Arsenal and Manchester United have established for hiring Irish players carries a significant element of self-perpetuation.

## CONCLUSION

In an industry where labour is the most critical of resources, the economic power of the wealthiest clubs provides the means to dominate the labour market to the point where they can buy the kind of success that less powerful clubs can never hope to achieve. This virtuous circle is a well-known phenomenon within American football where large-city teams dominate by purchasing emerging players from smaller-city teams (Leifer 1995: 201). What is perhaps not so obvious is that this success may be achieved in global sports, such as association football, at the expense of the same industry in other countries. In such cases, the less powerful clubs in the donor leagues are trapped in a vicious circle in which they lose players and fans to richer foreign clubs. This, in turn, ensures that the quality of the spectacle that they offer remains relatively low, with the result that they are unable to achieve the kind of competitive and commercial success that would enable them to recruit and retain better players and larger crowds.

From the evidence presented here, the association football industry in Ireland would appear to contain many of the characteristic features of this situation. Like Chile and Uruguay in football (Arbena 1994) and the Dominican Republic in baseball (Klein 1991), it has watched its finest sporting talent leave to join one of the wealthier leagues at the core of European football. If anything, the scale and duration of the Irish brawn drain is probably greater since English clubs have brought relatively large numbers of players across the Irish Sea for most of the twentieth century. While much of this activity has been the work of the larger and more prestigious clubs, the domination of the English football industry is such that all of its clubs have hired players from Ireland at some stage. More recently, the extension of youth policies into Ireland has deepened the brawn drain because it has enabled English sides to acquire Irish players at an increasingly younger age. Such actions, which business analysts would describe as the backward integration of the supply chain, enabled English clubs to reduce the degree of uncertainty associated with buying older players while ensuring continuity of supply.

In resource dependency terms, this development ruptured the traditional pattern of buyer-supplier relations, as Irish clubs were no longer able to control access to Irish players. In other words, the relationship changed from being one of buyer and seller to one where English clubs began to supply themselves. The result is that Irish clubs are no longer able to generate income from the sale of promising players. Though this was traditionally rather small it nonetheless represented a valuable source of income for under-resourced clubs. At the very least, it provided a form of compensation for the loss of valuable players.

This drain of resources coincides with the declining competitiveness of domestic football in Ireland. Since the late-1970s Irish clubs (North and South) have repeatedly failed to get past the first round of European club competitions. Furthermore, only a handful of Irish-based players have been selected for their national sides since the 1980s, a trend that contrasts sharply with that of earlier decades. Indeed, the event is now so rare as to be virtually non-existent.

Nevertheless, many of the teams in the Irish leagues contain players who failed to make it beyond the trainee stage with English clubs. Irish domestic football gains from such return migration because those who return have experience of full-time training with professional coaches and established professionals. Additionally, the national teams (Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland) benefit from having players training and competing at a significantly

higher standard in the English leagues. Both of these are significant because they show that the relationship between the Irish and English leagues still has dimensions that render it more complicated than a simple zero sum game in which one party always gains at the expense of the other.<sup>12</sup> But if the relationship is to be characterised in these respects as one of dependent development it is also one in which the terms of dependency have changed. In the past Irish clubs looked to their English counterparts for large transfer fees. Now they look to the same clubs for young players who have failed to make the grade but are happy to return home and play at a lower standard.<sup>13</sup>

Meanwhile, Irish fans watch Irish players by travelling with Irish-based supporters' clubs to matches in English cities, or by watching live satellite TV broadcasts. Those in the Irish Republic may even use the domestic TV channel for this purpose. This degree of exposure is supplemented by extensive match coverage in the morning and evening newspapers. In sum, Irish football suffers similar contradictions to those of baseball and football in Latin America (Klein 1991; Arbena 1994). It has been penetrated and dominated by foreign employers and TV channels yet the overseas achievements of its players are a source of national pride.

*Patrick McGovern*

*London School of Economics & Political Science*

## **Notes**

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Ellis Cashmore, Colin Mills, Leslie Sklair, the editor and three anonymous referees for their comments. The usual disclaimer applies.

<sup>2</sup> Scottish clubs, notably Celtic and Rangers (Moorhouse 1986: 257), have also imported Irish footballers. However, the numbers involved have been relatively small by comparison.

<sup>3</sup> Bale's (1991: 198) study of the brawn drain included reference to the recruitment of young Irish athletes by leading U.S. athletics colleges (e.g., Villanova University).

<sup>4</sup> Magee and Sugden (1998) have already conducted a micro-level analysis that uses semi-structured interviews to examine the reasons why young Northern Irish footballers join English clubs.

<sup>5</sup> The vote of no confidence in the leadership abilities of the Football Association of Ireland executive in 1996 is indicative of some of its failings (*Sunday Tribune* 10.3. 1996).

<sup>6</sup> Irish clubs have occasionally imported players from England. However, this activity

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hardly bears comparison with the scale or quality of Irish players who moved in the other direction. Most of those hired by Irish teams have either been unable to make the grade in England or have already retired from English football (e.g., Bobby Charlton, Peter Lorimer).

<sup>7</sup> It is also worth noting that English clubs were importing Irish footballers within a few years of the foundation of the I.F.A. in 1880. John Peden, for example, was transferred from Linfield in Belfast to Newton Heath (now Manchester United) in 1893 (McGarrigle 1990: 75). The practice of buying players was well established by 1910 when Mickey Hamill was purchased by Manchester United from Belfast Celtic in 1910 for £175 (McGarrigle 1990: 49).

<sup>8</sup> Grimsby's offer of £49.50 less £10 for digs (with no fee) to a sixteen-year-old from Coleraine is indicative of just how cheaply players can be procured (*Irish Times* 16.2.1999).

<sup>9</sup> Club size and divisional status are strongly, and positively, associated (Chi-square 2570.4, df=6, p<.005; Gamma .947, p<.005).

<sup>10</sup> I have not been able to address this hypothesis with wider evidence as the *Rothman's Yearbook* only began to publish complete information on transfers after 1981. By this stage the number of Irish transfers had declined to the point where the evidence would still only have been based on a handful of scattered cases. It should also be noted that the highest fee to date for an Irish player is £150,000 by Coventry City for Barry Prenderville from Cherry Orchard (Dublin) in 1995. This fee was itself the result of a UEFA ruling after Cherry Orchard took a case against Coventry's decision to pay a nominal fee (*World Soccer*, February 1996).

<sup>11</sup> This literature also finds that most of the players who sign from donor leagues do so on terms set by the foreign clubs. Anecdotal evidence from the biographies of Irish players, such as Paul McGrath (Dervan 1994) and Frank Stapleton (Stapleton 1991) would appear to support this claim.

<sup>12</sup> As Irish players earn significantly higher salaries in England their families (and local communities) may enjoy the benefits of significant remittances. Roy Keane, for example, was able to move his parents from a local authority house in Cork to a detached house in the suburbs, shortly after joining Manchester United (Hannigan 1998: 45).

<sup>13</sup> Waterford United, for instance, have recently stated that one of their key objectives is to 'provide football career opportunities for talented young Irish players, many of whom have gone to English clubs at the age of 15 or 16, only to be rejected a couple of years later.' (*Irish Times* 2.9.1998).

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## Appendix 1 Irish Bargains

### *Arsenal 1970-1995*

Player	Year	Source	Fee (£)
Liam Brady	1973	Apprentice	No fee
Frank Stapleton	1973	Apprentice	No fee
David O'Leary	1973	Apprentice	No fee
John Devine	1976	Apprentice	No fee
Jimmy Harvey	1977	Glenavon	30,000
Paul Gorman	1979	Apprentice	No fee
Colin Hill	1981	Apprentice	No fee
Niall Quinn	1983	Apprentice	No fee
Pat Scully	1987	Apprentice	No fee
Kwame Ampadu	1988	Apprentice	No fee

### *Manchester United 1970-1995*

Player	Year	Source	Fee (£)
Sammy McIlroy	1971	Apprentice	No fee
Trevor Andersen	1972	Portadown	20,000
Ray O'Brien	1973	Shelbourne	15,000
Mick Martin	1973	Bohemians	15,000
Gerry Daly	1973	Bohemians	12,500
Paddy Roche	1973	Shelbourne	15,000
David McCreery	1974	Apprentice	No fee
Jimmy Nicholl	1974	Apprentice	No fee
Ashley Grimes	1977	Bohemians	20,000
Thomas Connell	1978	Coleraine	Unknown
Kevin Moran	1978	Pegasus	Nominal
Thomas Sloan	1978	Ballymena Utd	Unknown
Anto Whelan	1980	Bohemians	Unknown
Norman Whiteside	1981	Apprentice	No fee
Paul McGrath	1982	St Pat's Athletic	30,000
Derek Brazil	1986	Apprentice	No fee
Liam O'Brien	1986	Shamrock R.	50,000
Brian Carey	1990	Cork City	100,000
Keith Gillespie	1992	Apprentice	No Fee

*Sources:* McGarrigle (1990) and (1991); *Rothman's Yearbook* (Various years).