

Inside Ireland's ULTRAS Movement

On the 12th of November 2023, two Dublin football clubs met each other in the FAI Cup Final in the Aviva Stadium, with St Patrick's Athletic beating Bohemians 3-1 in front of a record attendance of 43,881 people. The match was a huge testament to how far League of Ireland football has progressed in the last few years with its colossal attendance, incredible atmosphere and high quality of football on display.

However, for people in the League Of Ireland community, the final was marred by an incident which took place before the game. The 'Ultras' groups of both clubs were told their planned displays could not take place, reportedly due to safety concerns from the stadium's security staff.

The Shed End Invincibles (St Pats) and The Notorious Boo Boys (Bohemians) had each put thousands of euros into designing, painting and coordinating massive displays for their teams. These consisted of a mixture of flags, banners and pyrotechnics only for it to be pulled at the last minute.

Both sets of Ultras protested this decision by disrupting the game multiple times by throwing flares on the pitch in protest. Many neutral onlookers would have seen this as a mindless act of hooliganism and indeed, Ultras around the world are often likened simply to thugs and hooligans.

But this is not the case. When you look behind the curtain, you will see a rich underground subculture that runs deep in Irish and European football.

"For Ultras, it's not just about matchday and supporting your team for 90 minutes, but often it's about turning supporting your club into a lifestyle"

What are Ultras?

Ultras are one of the biggest subcultures in Europe but the whole scene is lesser known in Ireland - though it has been present in Irish football since the 1990s.

They are essentially the fanatical wing of supporters at a football club. Most football clubs in the world have one or several Ultras groups who show their support in extreme ways - through huge coordinated displays, singing for the entire game and using drums, flags, megaphones and occasionally engaging in violence.

Ultras are often very politically charged, though mostly on a local level. For Ultras, it's not just about matchday and supporting your team for 90 minutes, but often it's about turning supporting your club into a lifestyle.

Ethan Rooney
Words
Jon Daczkowski
Photography



“Through the adoption of a foreign style of support, the Ultras often find their own way of life at odds with the understanding of the greater Irish society”



Many Ultras groups are involved in community activism in their local areas outside of matchday and many across the continent have hardline left-wing or right-wing ideologies – though most don't and are primarily focused on supporting their club through radical means.

Ultras simultaneously exist as a subversive, anti-social and counter cultural phenomenon that is particularly alien in Irish sporting culture where we as a nation pride ourselves in sporting terms on being friendly, respectable and sportsmanlike.

As journalist Max Jack explains “Because the Ultra style of support is not embedded in English football culture, instead originating in Italy, most people outside of the League of Ireland have a hard time understanding what being an Ultra actually entails.”

“Through the adoption of a foreign style of support, the Ultras often find their own way of life at odds with the understanding of the greater Irish society, which is influenced by a perceived heavy presence of British culture—especially in the media and sports. In this light, many members of the Ultras recognize their actions as a symbolic mode of resistance.”



Ultras in Ireland.

“A misconception of Ultras culture that people have learned from viral social media videos showing eastern European lads in a forest kicking the shit out of each other.”

Some people cringe when they hear of Irish Ultras. Many people envision Irish Ultras as kids from somewhere like Dundalk trying to cosplay as a gigantic seven foot Polish bloke in a balaclava who fights police for a living. This is a misconception of Ultras culture that people have learned from viral social media videos showing eastern European lads in a forest kicking the shit out of each other.

The first official Ultras group began in Ireland in 2001 with SRFC Ultras from Shamrock Rovers. A few supporters started this group at a bad time for the club, when attendances were bad and results even worse. They decided that if Rovers can't win any games, at least they can try to spur the team on with colour and noise – if nothing else it would mean that going to games was fun again.

A few months later the Shed End Invincibles started at St Patrick's Athletic and for the next couple of years Shamrock Rovers vs St Pats became known as 'The Derby of Colour', as it was the only game in Ireland where both sets of fans would light up the stadium with flares, flags and songs every game.

Throughout the 2000s, the Ultras scene began to grow as more groups began emerging. In 2003, Brigoid Dearg from Shelbourne FC were formed as well as groups at Drogheda United, Dundalk FC, Derry City, Bohemians, Sligo Rovers and Cork City.

These were groups of young passionate supporters trying to make something special in a league that wasn't trendy, sexy or appealing. The football, grounds and the league's reputation were all crap but what was happening in the stands was something special.

The League of Ireland was now seeing atmospheres that were stylistically similar to the fanatical support you would see in countries like Italy.



“One occasion in 2013 when a Derry fan brought a Swastika flag to a home match and was promptly given a beating by a group of Derry Ultras.”



Flags, drums, flares, confetti and loud atmospheres began becoming the norm in Ireland. Groups in Ireland began establishing alliances and links with some of the most well-known and respected Ultras groups in Europe, such as Shamrock Rovers with Panathinaikos and Hammarby as well as Shelbourne with AS Roma. Other groups established strong links with major teams from Denmark, Italy, Germany, Turkey and beyond.

Some of the displays being produced were artistically impressive and new battles and rivalries began to emerge. The groups at Shamrock Rovers (SRFC Ultras) and Sligo Rovers (Forza Rovers) developed a rivalry despite the clubs themselves not being traditional rivals.

This fixture became a tit-for-tat between the Ultras where they would try to outdo and insult each other with their displays at each meeting and this would sometimes lead to violent clashes in and outside of the stadium. SRFC Ultras even once robbed Forza Rovers' drum during an altercation and proudly displayed the drum against them at the next fixture - the ultimate insult!

Naturally, violence could be a part of this scene as different groups would occasionally clash, but it was not as big a factor as it was in other countries. Despite this, some of the groups began gaining notoriety and the odd

“The groups at Shamrock Rovers (SRFC Ultras) and Sligo Rovers (Forza Rovers) developed a rivalry despite the clubs themselves not being traditional rivals.”



fight would take place. The Evening Herald even falsely accused SRFC Ultras of having organised the Love Ulster riots in Dublin in 2006.

In the eyes of the media, Ultras were often lumped in with the hooligan firms who were also active at the same clubs. There is a lot of crossover between the hooligan and Ultras groups in Ireland but they are two different scenes with different aims and philosophies.

Politics often played a role in these groups. Derry City's Red Partisans were famously anti-fascist and left-wing and would come into physical altercations with other supporters over it – namely one occasion in 2013 when a Derry fan brought a Swastika flag to a home match and was promptly given a beating by a group of Derry Ultras.

The politics of these groups was mostly left-leaning and progressive, despite some instances of right wing symbolism, such as a US Confederate flag being seen at Cork City's ground a number of times throughout the 2000s. It's also worth noting that the current most active Ultras group at Cork City, The First Cork City Brigade, are potentially the most overtly left wing group in the league these days.

In 2018, Dundalk's Shed Side Army managed to get the club fined €18k for flying a Palestine flag in a home



European fixture vs Hajduk Split. Dundalk supporters protested this fine by bringing even more Palestine flags to the next game.

In the late 2010s, the Ultras scene began to fade out to an extent. Some of the most prevalent groups became less active and other groups such as Brigoid Dearg and Drogheda's Famous45 were in conflicts with their club that made it harder for them to operate. From their inception, the Ultras of Ireland had been protesting and highlighting corruption and nepotism within The FAI which also meant that stricter rules and policing measures were being brought in to curb their rise.

It seemed for a time that this subculture might be dying in Irish football but everything changed in the post-Covid era. After two years of supporters being unable to see their teams live, something clicked with many people and when spectators were allowed back into Irish stadiums in October 2021, these groups once again began to thrive.

The first full attendance fixture post-Covid saw SRFC Ultras mark 20 years since the group's foundation with a massive full stand display involving hundreds of flares and thousands of flags.

A massive sheet of material with the group's logo was pulled up from the roof of the stadium and a banner unveiled across the whole stand which read '20 years of organised chaos'. In the following years the scene has become more active than it has ever been.



"Shelbourne's Brigoid Dearg were a massive part of the 'Save Tolka Park' campaign which ultimately saved their historically significant stadium from being demolished and sold to developers."



Present day.

In the post-Covid era, League of Ireland attendances have skyrocketed. Clubs such as Shelbourne have reported that their average attendance has increased by 216% since 2019.

With this the Ultras scene has once again begun to boom. The quality and size of the displays has improved considerably and the general standard of the football, as well as the organised support in Ireland, is extremely high.

A new generation of creative and passionate kids who are mad about their local football clubs has emerged and this new youth fervour mixed with the experience of the old guard, who've been keeping the scene alive since the 2000s, has seen a really impressive scene emerge.

The Ultras groups have remained as active in their communities as they have in the stands. Shelbourne's Brigoid Dearg were a massive part of the 'Save Tolka Park' campaign which ultimately saved their historically significant stadium from being demolished and sold to developers.

Their Ultras marked this by unveiling a huge 'Save Tolka Park' banner across their stand as the teams came onto the pitch whilst one of their members spray painted on a 'D' to change the banner to 'Saved Tolka Park'.

Drogheda's Famous45 Ultras organised sleepouts over the Christmas period in 2023 to raise money for homeless



“The SRFC Ultras showed full solidarity to the banned supporters by unveiling a banner which read **‘Against Collective Punishments’** and singing ‘Fuck The FAI’ for significant portions of the game.”

people in their town. Shamrock Rovers Ultras have worked as part of a supporter’s collective with local direct provision residents and homeless charities to organise events, fundraisers and bring disadvantaged people to Rovers matches.

The groups all share a hatred and rivalry for each other but there is an element of respect between them. In September 2023 there were serious clashes in Oriel Park between Ultras from Drogheda and Dundalk, resulting in the FAI banning all Drogheda supporters from attending their next away fixture against Shamrock Rovers.

Despite Shamrock Rovers and Drogheda supporters regularly having violent altercations, the SRFC Ultras showed full solidarity to the banned supporters by unveiling a banner which read ‘Against Collective Punishments’ and singing “Fuck The FAI” for significant portions of the game.

This subculture runs deep in Irish football and those involved are far from the mindless hooligans or pyromaniacs they are portrayed as. These groups of mostly young men are extremely active in their communities and within their clubs.

The displays and songs they produce are often culturally relevant and signify pride in the culture and history of their towns and cities whilst also spurring on a contemporary form of faction fighting in Irish society.

In a recent derby between fierce rivals Shamrock Rovers and Bohemians, the Bohemians Ultras unveiled a banner which read ‘Death to every foe and traitor’ whilst the Shamrock Rovers Ultras unveiled a display protesting a recent statement by their club which condemned the use of pyro.

They unfurled a 10 metre cut out banner of the Dublin coat of arms and lit a number of flares, with a banner underneath that read ‘Happy is the city where citizens disobey’. Both these displays, whilst also being relevant to the derby and feelings towards each other, are deep-rooted historical and cultural references.

A viral tweet after the game read “(I) Was asked by a German friend to explain the fan displays at the Bohs



“It was something that existed outside of mainstream football culture in Ireland for years. These Ultras groups are due a huge amount of credit for keeping the torch lit”

v Rovers game recently and you do have to admire the creativity of fan groups who are riffing on a lyric from a 150 year old rebel song or a translation of a latin civic motto.”

The League of Ireland is in a good place right now. Attendances are skyrocketing and it has become fashionable to support your local club. Teams like Bohemians with their marketing and merchandising combined with clubs like Dundalk and Shamrock Rovers achieving success in Europe has meant that overall the League of Ireland has become something people want to be involved in.

It was something that existed outside of mainstream football culture in Ireland for years. These Ultras groups are due a huge amount of credit for keeping the torch lit in this league and making it something special when no one else cared.

Social historian and St Pat’s fan Donal Fallon put it well when he paid homage to the supporters after an amazing spectacle witnessed in this year’s cup final between Pats and Bohs:

“It is one of the last things in this city that has a bit of heart and soul...Teams like Shamrock Rovers almost died, Pats were similarly near the funeral home at one point but people saved them. They saved Tolka Park too. That it has become more mainstream than counter cultural is testament to a lot of ordinary, working class people”.

Jon is a photographer who has been embedded within Shamrock Rovers’ SRFC Ultras group.