

The O'Brien Effect

The innings that changed Irish cricket

Ten years on from Kevin O'Brien's stunning century which inspired a famous World Cup victory over England, Calum Trenaman considers the impact that innings had, and continues to have, on the game in Ireland



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A seemingly impossible chase. A match-winning century – still the fastest in World Cup history. Audacious, mind-boggling shots against an England team which had tied with eventual winners India a few days earlier and would beat South Africa a few days later. Ask English cricketers, cricket writers and supporters of a certain age what ignited their love of the game and most will answer: the 2005 Ashes. For the Irish cricketing fraternity, that seminal moment came at Bangalore.

March of this year marked the 10-year anniversary of Ireland's stunning defeat of England at the 2011 World Cup. Chasing 328, the underdogs were on the ropes at 111-5 before Kevin O'Brien proceeded to smash 113 off 63 balls, Ireland eventually reaching their target with five balls to spare. O'Brien tells WCM he "knew" victory was in the bag by the 36th over, with 99 runs still needed for victory, because of how defensively England were playing. Not thought. *Knew*.

"Every now and again someone wakes up and simply has the best day of their life," England's Graeme Swann later reflected. "Kevin O'Brien was that guy against us." The result sent shockwaves through the cricketing world and accelerated Ireland's bid for Test status, which they were eventually awarded in 2017.

Harry Tector, the 21-year-old Ireland batsman, says that the famous win at the M Chinnaswamy Stadium – which he was only able to watch after convincing his parents to let him pull a sickie, despite having a football match later that day – was a defining moment in his cricketing education.

"There was a bit of controversy about how I was going to 'recover' from my phantom sickness to play in the football match," he jokes. Tector left for football with Ireland struggling at five wickets down and assumed the game was done and dusted.

"After the [football] game there were maybe 10 or 15 overs to go in Ireland's run-chase, and we were trying to get it on in my mum's car. It was crackling through the radio. Ireland must have needed 80 or 90 off 15 and Kev was whacking it everywhere. We were driving home in rush-hour traffic and we got into the house with about two overs to go. It was just so exciting.

"Being an Irish cricket fan when I was younger, there was no real reporting of it in the papers or on the news. And I always sort of questioned why that was. And then, when they did that... It was just everywhere. Which was amazing. It 100 per cent inspired me to want to play



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Tector says it was a "watershed moment" for the perception of Irish cricket. "It showed that 2007 [when Ireland beat Pakistan and progressed to the Super 8 stage of the World Cup] wasn't just a fluke with an amazing bunch of players. It showed that Ireland were getting better and more consistent. And it was a fabulous innings that definitely changed the way Irish cricket was viewed here."

Cricket Ireland CEO Warren Deutrom says that by the end of 2011, there were 25,000 club cricketers in Ireland – double the number in 2007. That figure had doubled again by the end of 2015. Revenues also increased. When Deutrom took over in 2005, he estimates the organisation's turnover to have been €300,000. By the end of 2011, he says turnover was

between €3-4 million. Turnover for 2020 prior to the pandemic was expected to be €10 million. The growth of the game in Ireland is in no small part down to wins such as Bangalore. "We need more victories like that," says O'Brien.

They produced another famous victory at the 2015 World Cup, against West Indies in Nelson – "a controlled, aggressive, fabulous performance," says Deutrom – however the ICC's decision to cut the number of participating teams to just 10 led to them missing out on the 2019 edition. Ireland have not played at a major international tournament since the T20 World Cup in 2016.

The T20 World Cup later this year will provide Ireland with a welcome opportunity to cause further upsets, but Tector believes the team has transitioned into a different phase of its development, where turning over more established countries shouldn't really come as a

ABOVE: Kevin O'Brien and his brother Niall after Ireland pull off the unthinkable at Bangalore in 2011

Kevin O'Brien 113 (from 63 balls)

Ireland v England, M Chinnaswamy Stadium, Bangalore
World Cup group stage
March 2, 2011

50

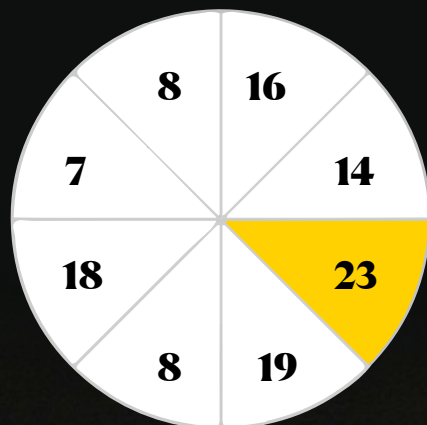
Number of deliveries to reach his hundred, the fastest in World Cup history

20

Number of deliveries to move from 50 to 100

35

Number of runs scored from the leg glance, his most productive shot



Number of sixes Number of fours

1

Number of ODI centuries O'Brien had scored prior to his hundred against England. He's still waiting for his third

shock. "Those massive, massive victories, where Ireland weren't given the respect maybe they deserved - over England in 2011 or Pakistan in 2007 - it almost wasn't expected. Whereas now I feel through results and performances, everyone knows that Ireland can beat these top teams."

Deutrom agrees. "What did we use the World Cup for? It was a means for us to be able to maintain the public visibility of Irish cricket. Why? Because we weren't in the Future Tours Programme (FTP), so we didn't really have that many fixtures between World Cups to maintain our visibility. Now it's the opposite."

"The very thing that we didn't have in the period that we were establishing ourselves is the thing that we now have, which is the ability to have more regular visibility between World Cups. We're [now] in the FTP, and therefore have the opportunity to play the larger nations on a much more consistent 12-month a year basis."

Deutrom says that while Ireland need to be given opportunities to play Test cricket, he can understand why Ireland and Afghanistan have not as yet been included in the World Test Championship, because "history shows us that it takes years, if not decades, for nations to be properly competitive in that format".

Ireland also do not yet have the infrastructure of other Test-playing nations but hope that when the new eight-year commercial rights cycle commences in 2024, they will be given a larger slice of the pie. With that additional support, says Deutrom, Cricket Ireland could then go to the Irish government for further assistance to establish stronger roots and a more permanent infrastructure.

Ireland's inclusion in the FTP and the new World Cup Super League - which will determine the first seven sides (alongside hosts India) to qualify for the 2023 World Cup - gives them the opportunity to compete regularly with the best teams in the world. They began their Super League campaign last summer with a 2-1 series defeat to England, which concluded with a rousing seven-wicket win for an Irish team that included six players aged 24 or under. A 3-0 defeat to Afghanistan in the UAE in January was a reminder of their shortcomings against spin, although the series was closer than the scoreline suggests. "If two balls had gone differently [in the first and last ODIs], we could have won," says Tector.

Series against Bangladesh and New Zealand which had been due to take place on home soil last summer had to be postponed due to Covid, and the pandemic has hit Ireland harder than most of the other Full Member nations, with fewer financial reserves to fall back on.

A €1.49 million grant from Sport Ireland, along with the furlough schemes brought in by the respective British and Irish governments, helped them survive. Deutrom says that without the Irish government's

Employee Wage Subsidy Scheme in particular, and the Covid resilience grant from Sport Ireland, "we would genuinely be struggling". Thankfully, there is now light at the end of the tunnel.

On the field, Ireland have been a team in flux for the past few years, with time catching up on the so-called golden generation. "We've gone through a bit of a transition period, but we are getting to be a good side again," says Kevin O'Brien, who, at 37, is now the oldest player in the squad. His older brother Niall has transitioned to life as a commentator and agent; Gary Wilson retired in March to become coach of North West Warriors in Ireland's inter-provincial set-up; while former captain William Porterfield will combine his international playing duties with a role on Wilson's coaching staff.

They join a number of other World Cup heroes who have hung up their boots but stayed within Irish cricket: Ed Joyce is coach of Ireland Women, Kyle McCallan sits on the High Performance Committee and Andy White is chair of selectors. The process of past players becoming coaches and administrators is orchestrated from the very top.



"We've got these great former players from the golden generation who are staying involved in Irish cricket, bringing their experience to bear, because the opportunities are now there for them," says Deutrom. "It's not just on the playing side. It's coaching, it's administration and it's behind the scenes that we're using our great players to effectively help build the system that exists over in England."

It bodes well for the national team's future prospects. As does the blend of youth and experience in the current side, with new skipper Andrew Balbirnie, the hard-hitting Paul Stirling - who has struck four centuries in his last six ODI innings - and O'Brien setting the standards for Tector and the next generation to follow. When Ireland completed that win over England at the Ageas Bowl last summer, it was Tector and O'Brien who saw them home with just a ball to spare.

"I still find that so bizarre," says Tector of calling his boyhood idol, Ireland's World Cup hero, a teammate. "I'd be so shy, I wouldn't talk to him when I was younger. I find it amazing that I can now call him a friend and have these memories with him."

IRISH CRICKET

LEFT: Harry Tector and O'Brien leave the field at the Ageas Bowl last summer after securing another famous win over England

ABOVE: John Mooney celebrates hitting the winning runs against West Indies at the 2015 World Cup