

JOHN PEDEN: AN EARLY IRISH SOCCER HERO

Recruitment of Irish players by Football League clubs peaked in the period 1946-1955, but from the late nineteenth century onwards there had been a steady flow of talent across the Irish Sea. In fact the movement of players from Ireland dates from at least the early 1890s, shortly after the formation of the Irish League in 1890-91. One of the first players to play professionally for an English club was Jack Reynolds, an Englishman who had settled in Northern Ireland after being stationed there with his Army Regiment. Reynolds played for Distillery and Ulster before joining West Bromwich Albion in March 1891. Two other former Distillery players who plied their trade in England were Bob Crone and Jack Taggart, and after a spell with Middlesbrough, the two linked up with Reynolds when they signed for the Baggies during the 1892-93 season.

Another of these early pioneers, and the first Irishman to turn out for Newton Heath, who as Manchester United went on to establish a strong reputation for employing Irish players, was John Peden, perhaps the most outstanding talent amongst all of these men. This is an attempt to tell the story of John Peden and put his career into some sort of perspective.

John Peden was born at the Maze, Lisburn on 12 July 1863, his father being employed at the nearby Maze Racecourse. John began playing football as a teenager and turned out for a number of junior clubs including Clarence, Prospect, Distillery Seconds and Innisfoil. He played at least once for the Distillery first team during the 1885-86 season, but subsequently became a founder member of Linfield Athletic when this club was formed and appeared at outside left, scoring in their inaugural fixture against Distillery in September 1886. Peden's association with Linfield would suggest he was working at the Linfield Spinning Mill, whose employees had established the club in March of 1886.

John's form at club level was such that he was selected to play for Ireland against Scotland in February 1887, thus making him the very first Linfield player to win international honours. Thereafter, he was a regular in the national team, mostly featuring in the outside-left position. With much of the season given over to friendlies, Linfield decided to enter the FA Cup in 1888-89 and succeeded in reaching the first round proper, where they travelled over to achieve a commendable 2-2 draw against Nottingham Forest, John attracting attention by virtue of his tremendous pace and the fact that he scored his side's two goals. Linfield withdrew before the replay, playing Forest in a friendly, which they won 3-1.

However, when the Irish League was established in 1890-91, Linfield went on to win the competition in the first three seasons, remarkably winning the 'double' of the league and the Irish Cup on each occasion. John Peden was a key member of that team and in the spring of 1893 he began to attract some firm attention from English clubs anxious to recruit him, notably Newton Heath. He had played for Linfield in a friendly match against the Heathens in February 1893, when the Belfast club registered a 2-0 victory and later that month he



John Peden in his playing days (John Peden)



played for Ireland against England at Villa Park. After this match he was approached by officials of the Manchester club and signed amateur forms and a Football League registration form, before returning home. It seems he had no immediate intention of moving to England, possibly being concerned by the fact that once he had signed professional forms he would have to give up his place in the international team, and so he resolved to play out the 1892-93 season with Linfield, helping his colleagues to a 5-1 victory over Cliftonville in the Irish Cup final.

John made the transition to professionalism that summer and started the 1893-94 season playing for Newton Heath in their new home at Bank Street, Clayton. Although he was now 31 years old, John made an immediate impact on his Football League debut against Burnley on 2 September 1893, setting up the opening goal in a 3-2 victory and being prominent throughout the game. The *Athletic News* (4 September 1893) commented, "Peden was a success, and was carried off after the match, he and Fitzsimons [sic] making a grand wing." Peden quickly established himself in the side, producing some fine contributions in the early part of the season, although his form tailed off as the campaign wore on and the team slipped towards the foot of the table. Match reports often noted his clever play from the wing, but when occasionally switched to the role of centre forward he was generally a disappointment. At the end of that season Newton Heath were forced to play against Liverpool in a Test Match (or play-off match in modern parlance) in order to retain their place in the First Division. The Merseyside club won 2-0 and Newton Heath were relegated, but John did not stay in Manchester, opting to move on to Sheffield United in the summer of 1894. United were of course a member of the top-flight at that time and there was the additional attraction that their centre forward Bob Hill had played alongside John in his Linfield days.

JOHN PEDEN FACTFILE

Born: The Maze, Lisburn, 12 July 1863.

Died: Belfast, 15 September 1944.

Senior Career:

Linfield (Sep 1886 to cs. 1893): 130A, 108G

Newton Heath (cs. 1893 to Jul 1894): 32A, 8G

Sheffield United (Jul 1894 to Dec 1894): 10A, 0G

Distillery (Jul 1895 to Mar 1899): 87A, 41G

Linfield (cs. 1899 to Apr 1906): 74A, 32G

(statistics relate to all competitive matches)

Ireland:

24A, 7G; debut vs. Scotland, 19 February 1887

Irish League:

4A, 1G

Honours:

Irish League Winner: 1890-91, 1891-92, 1892-93 (Linfield); 1895-96, 1898-99 (Distillery)

Irish Cup Winner: 1891, 1893 (Linfield); 1896 (Distillery); 1902 (Linfield).

City Cup Winner: 1901 (Linfield)

County Antrim Shield Winner: 1890 (Shield withheld) (Linfield); 1896, 1897 (Distillery)

Belfast Charities Cup Winner: 1891, 1892, 1893, 1901 (Linfield)

John never really settled at Bramall Lane, despite impressing with his skills and towards the end of 1894 he returned for a lengthy stay in Ireland, coinciding with the birth of twin daughters. The domestic game in Ireland now accepted professionalism and John opted for a return home the following summer, investing the money he had earned in England in a confectionary and tobacconists' shop ('The Forward') on Sandy Row, close to the centre of Belfast. There was some surprise that he signed for Distillery and not Linfield, but Distillery offered a substantial wage of £1 a week, said to be the highest in Irish football



at the time. In addition, although he had strong links with both clubs Linfield's future was not firmly secure at this point for they had recently been forced to quit their ground at Ulsterville Avenue and were seeking a new home.

John spent the next four years with Distillery, and in his first season the club won the Irish League title for the first time, plus the Irish Cup and the County Antrim Shield for good measure. He also continued to represent both the Irish League and Ireland at international level during this period, one of his many achievements being to score the goal that secured his country their first-ever victory in an away game, in the fixture against Wales in February 1898. He was presented with the match ball and for many years this was displayed in the window of his shop to which was attached a verse: "This is the ball that did the trick and I'm the man who gave it the kick." Distillery won the title for a second time in 1898-99 but at the end of that season, John was released. Now 37 years old, he rejoined Linfield and continued to represent them over the next few seasons, reverting to amateur status in June 1900. His principal role with the club was as the team's coach, but he occasionally chose to select himself and his final appearance as a player came on 21 April 1906, when aged 42 years he lined up against Distillery in the Charities Cup semi-final tie.

Thereafter John ran his shop until his death in Belfast on 15 September 1944. His son Jack also proved a fine footballer, winning amateur international honours for Ireland and appearing for a string of Irish League clubs including Cliftonville, Queen's Island, Bangor, Glentoran, Ards and Linfield in the 1920s.

John was undoubtedly one of the finest talents in Irish football of his era, and his style of play was in many ways reminiscent of another Irishman who was to play for Newton Heath's successors Manchester United some 70 years later, a certain George Best. John possessed tremendous pace and dribbling skills and a powerful shot. Added to this he was occasionally temperamental, and on at least one occasion was sent off, playing for Distillery against Glentoran in the 1896-97 season. Although most of his football was played from the outside-left position, he was a prolific goal-scorer in domestic Irish football: 140 goals in 204 appearances for Linfield and 41 goals in 87 competitive appearances for Distillery. He was unable to match this in the more competitive field of the Football League, but scored regularly at international level.

Comments on his play suggests he was perhaps more of an individual than a team player, and that he was often guilty of 'playing to the gallery'. However, his style was popular with the fans who referred to him as "The People's John". As late as 1898, by which time he was very much at the veteran stage of his career, John was described as, "One of Ireland's best forwards ... A player who exercises a lot of judgement in all his play. Has never failed to come up to expectations in an important match." (*Ireland's Saturday Night*, 5 March 1898) His obituary in the same newspaper (16 September 1944) notes, "He was an artist on the field. His sprinting abilities, which won him many trophies at athletic meetings, made him one of the fastest wingers of his day. His ball control was a treat to watch, and he was adept at drawing the defence, cutting in and shooting with terrific power."

John Peden's importance in the history of Irish soccer is that he was not only a great talent, but a player who was immensely popular with the fans. One of the first Irish imports to make his mark in the Football League, he also holds the distinction of being Manchester United's first Irish-born player.

Sources: Athletic News; Ulster Cycling & Football News; Ireland's Saturday Night; Thanks to Gerald Leggett (great grandson), John Peden (grandson), Denis Clarebrough, Dawson Simpson, George Glass and Nicola Struthers of the Manchester United Museum for their assistance.

