

Kevin Kilbane, Irish Pride **Rory Cassidy, Bridgetown College, Wexford**

Preston, England. 17-Year-Old Kevin Kilbane is engrossed in learning Amhran na bhFiann with the support of his cousin. He is conscious that if he is going to pull on the green jersey in front of thousands at Lansdowne Road he needs to know the lyrics. Fast forward two years and Kilbane is making his Irish debut in Reykjavik.

Growing up in Preston in the 1980's, all Kevin ever wanted to do was play for Ireland. He spent hours on the streets practising football, wearing his Irish shirt. He was the first generation of his family to be born across the pond and that always lingered with him. As a youngster, Kilbane rejected the chance to play for England. He was aware it wasn't the future in international football he had in mind although at the time he hadn't been offered the chance to play for Ireland.

Throughout a noteworthy career Kevin handled many questions about his cultural identity. At the time the media in England branded players such as Kilbane, Jason McAteer and Matt Holland as 'Plastic Paddys'. It is evident that Kevin has a genuine grá for Irish culture. He is often pictured in his Mayo jersey and supports his beloved county regularly. He works here, he lives here and in my mind and his mind, he is without question Irish.

'It just brought everything back from when I was a boy watching Euro 88, Italia 90 and USA 94 that this was where I always wanted to be. That's what I always dreamed of becoming: an international footballer'. In 1997, Kilbane played his first senior game against Iceland in a 4-2 win. Kevin affectionately remembers hearing the anthem for the first time and donning the green shirt as an 'incredible feeling' and one that he would like to bottle permanently. He revealed to me that he feels that game 'shaped him' as an international player.

The pinnacle of Kevin's career was undoubtedly representing Ireland in the 2002 World Cup. Kevin felt 'overwhelming pride' knowing his family were in the stadium. It was his childhood dream and it had finally come true.

Unfortunately, that infamous night in Saint-Denis will live long in Kevin's mind for all the wrong reasons. With a place in the 2010 World Cup and Ireland dominating, chaos unfolded. That defeat after the Henry handball fiasco still pains Kevin today. 'To lose that playoff in that manner certainly still hurts'.

Kevin was always emotional when he heard Amhran na bhFiann. 'I always thought about my family and what it would have meant for one of them if they could have had the opportunity to represent their country'.

I felt a remarkable connection to Kevin during this interview. His immense pride to be Irish is something we can all aspire to have. When 17 year old Kilbane was learning the anthem at home in Preston he would've only dreamed of having such an illustrious career. He followed his passion, you can too.

