Football boots.

A Short story by :Jim Nelson

From the age of five until I realised that I was never going to be a professional player (Around the age of 40), I was obsessed with football, and when that realisation dawned upon me, I became an enthusiastic participant until I was too old to play anymore.

Now I am just a big fan.

Throughout my childhood I kicked the toes out of my shoes, tore the knees out of my trousers and regularly broke windows  whilst indulging this obsession.

My earliest recollection of playing with a ball like object, was when we visited my mam’s relatives up the road.

There was a lawn which took up half of the long back garden, and our Nana used to roll newspaper into a ball, tie it with string and give it to us children to play kicking it around on the grass.

That was not before the invention of rubber as you might think it to be, it was just a long time ago.

I don’t remember showing any particular talent during these preschool ‘free for all’ sessions in Nanas, but I carried on regardless kicking balls and anything that resembled one, in low babies,  high babies and national school.

I played Gaelic football and hurling for the Star boys National School in Sandymount, up until fifth class when Ted Cooling one of my teachers, the headmaster, sadist and chairman of Clann na Gael Gaelic club, found out that I played soccer and brought down the GAA interdict upon me , excluding me from both teams.

I was perfectly happy playing the three games, and he would probably never have found out except that I wrote a letter to a National school magazine of the time ‘Young View’, criticising the GAA’s ban on so called ‘foreign games’,  and extolling the virtues of soccer.

Needless to say, that once my letter was printed, the cat was out of the bag. Coolings attitude towards me changed dramatically and his sadistic side became more pronounced in our dealings with each other.

Before this time he reserved his sadism for the serious crimes of  chewing gum, smoking or ‘scutting’ on the back of trucks, a widespread pastime and mode of transport for kids not engaged in playing sports in those times.

The very day that the magazine with my letter arrived in the school, he stopped our class and red faced with fury he brought down that prohibition upon me, like the pope excommunicating a sinner from the church, pointing his quivering cane at me like a magic crozier, to smite me.

I doubt that he sought approval for the ban of an eleven-year-old child from GAA council, but certainly as far as he was concerned I was never going to play for the school again.

His small minded niggardliness cost me a potential four appearances in Croke Park for the annual hurling and football blitz’s, which took place for National school students in fifth and sixth class.

Before all that, there were ten boys of my age and in my class at school who were living on either London Bridge Road or Tritonville Road, so we all palled around together, and of course played football anywhere and everywhere in the area.

Apart from having full blown matches on the road, we used Ringsend Park, a cricket training field behind my Nanas house, and the Hockey Union of Ireland’s home ground which was behind our house. We also played on the reclaimed land between Ringsend Park and the Strand, once it was actually reclaimed and grassed over in the late sixties.

No matter where we were playing, it seemed that that was all we did, there was always a ball.

At the back of our house, there was an area formed by the gable end of next door and our two story bathroom over kitchen which abutted the main house at right angle.

We called this area ‘the area‘ and that’s where I practised with a ball, and broke windows when I wasn’t actually playing a game somewhere else.

I could bounce the ball off next doors gable end which mimicked a cross which I could head, catch on my chest or kick.

I could spin the ball off the wall,  I could put spin on it from my head, I could stop it dead on my chest, or I could flick it in whatever direction I desired depending on the angle of my foot when I kicked it.

I learned so much in that ‘area‘ but occasionally things went wrong.

There were no windows in the gable end of next door‘s but there was the kitchen windows behind, me and our bedroom window to my left, which I usually used as the goal.

I never blasted the ball at any of the windows, but sometimes they broke even with a tap.

One time I thought that the bottom of the sash window in our bedroom was open and I took a penalty, but it wasn’t.

During the long summer evenings we often played knockout competitions in the cricket training ground behind my Nana’s against other kids from Sandymount, Irishtown or Ringsend, taking the names of league of Ireland clubs.

One year I played for Drumcondra (Drums)

My two uncles Dessie and Tommy who had played a bit in their day, though probably only in their 30s at this time, they seemed incredibly old to me, would watch us over the garden fence and always said that I was a good little footballer.

Dessie recommended me to the coach of the junior Shelbourne team, and I signed for them when I was nine

I’d never played for a formal club before this, and I felt a bit out of my depth is at Shels.

The first night that I went for training, I didn’t have any boots.

Prior to this we all played in runners, Summer sandals or even on occasion Wellington boots.

Football boots were something that you saw Alan Ball or Bobby Moore wear in the photos on football cards, or in Shoot or some other football magazine.

I trained in my charitable donation from America Basketball shoes, but most of the kids were older than me, were proper football boots, and it was too rough.

Around the same time the father of Mickey Geoghegan, a kid from my class, started a junior football club in Bath Avenue which they called Bath Rangers, and even though Bath Avenue was technically one road outside our catchment area. all of us other kids joined up.

We had to get an approval form signed by a parent, but Mr Geoghegan and his friend Mr May who helped him, were well known in the area, so there was no problem.

There was a genuine Football prodigy in my class in school, his name was Davey Langan, he lived in Irishtown.

Davey was a true footballing genius, streets ahead of the rest of us even at that age.

He went on to have a great career as a professional footballer for Several English League sides, and a nine year career for the Republic of Ireland.

He joined Bath Rangers with the rest of us, but there was no question as to who was the most important player in our team, in fact he was a one man team and any time he played, we won!

As I was now playing proper junior league football, the question of football boots came up again.

I could not play matches in runners any more.

I approached da on the matter, in fact I approached him at almost every waking moment, and eventually he relented and agreed to bring me into Guineys department store, where he knew someone, to get me a pair.

I remember being beside myself as I waited for the big day, but I was to be mortally disappointed when the man that da knew In the shoe department, convinced him that a pair of Blackthorn Gaelic boots were just what was needed, for the “ankle protection“.

I didn’t know it at the time but rugby boots also provided ankle protection, all I knew was that soccer boots didn’t, and I was sick with disappointment as da agreed wholeheartedly with your man, and he bought those Gaelic clodhoppers for me.

In fairness they were not too bad, they were black, they had three white stripes like Adidas, and they had moulded rubber studs like all the other junior football boots, such as the Little Sport brand, boots that I hoped I was going to get.

To their credit they did not have the big hard Gaelic ‘toe’ that real GAA boots had.

The only problem with them was that they covered my ankles, I just could not go to training, or play a match in them in that state.

Initially I folded the leather down to below my ankle, but that proved just too uncomfortable to be sustained for any length of time.

I decided to cut them down which wasn’t a bad idea in itself, if I had had the sense to go about it in a rational manner.

However I was a bit young for rationality, so instead of marking where I should cut and using a scissors, I used a Stanley knife and sort of hacked my way along an arbitrary line where I thought was about right.

When I had finished, the left boot while by no means perfect, was better than the right one which I had cut way too low, to the point where it was difficult to keep it on my foot, but even so, In their new state, I had a pair of football boots infinitely better that they had been originally.

Several of my teammates, without the benefit of a close inspection obviously, mistook my footwear for real Adidas.

I was very much a left footed player, I seldom if ever kicked with my right, and as I had made a better job of the left boot kicking a ball was not a problem.

The only thing that I used my right foot for was running, but even at that it was difficult to keep the boot on.

Mister May recognised my difficulty when I had left my boot behind for the umpteenth time, and solved the problem by  strapping an elastic bandage over the boot and around my ankle. This solution looked cool on two levels, my boots still looked like soccer boots, and I looked like I was playing on with an injury.

I managed to grow out of my Blackthorn football boots and eventually got a pair of little sports when my auntie from America bought me the entire Everton kit and new football boots for my birthday.

The End.