

The following message was issued by FAI President Gerry McEnaney on 12 March 2021:

Good morning to you all.

A year ago this week, Irish football issued our first cessation order and the country soon discovered the meaning of the word lockdown. It is hard to believe that we have endured the hardships brought upon our lives and our sport by the pandemic, harder still to come to terms with the fact that we are still not out of the woods yet in the battle against coronavirus.

As President of the Football Association of Ireland, I want to mark this unwanted anniversary with a note to bring you up to date with some of the recent developments at the Association and to urge you all to come together like never before as we continue the fight against COVID-19 and look forward to the day when all our footballers, of all ages and abilities, are back on the field playing the game we love.

Of particular concern to me at the current time is the mental health aspect around our absence from the football experience. As players, coaches, referees, volunteers, administrators and fans we all know and understand the value of being part of the football community. That sense of belonging is the same for someone who puts on their boots every Sunday as it is for someone who walks down to the local pitch on a Saturday morning and leans over the fence as the latest generation of wannabe heroes strut their stuff. COVID-19 has denied so many of us the opportunity to share our passion for football and our interest in the game with our football family and I particularly ask you in this message to look out for those currently missing the game more than anyone. It may be an elderly neighbour who can't get a see a match, it may be a young child who can't get to play a game. We need football to look out for them and to look after them.

I know from talking to people at all levels of the game and all across the country how this pandemic is hurting so many people. We have lost many great football people to COVID-19 and I know many more are so affected by the isolation that has come with the pandemic.

Please look out for each other. Please support each other. Please offer a helping hand.

Ní neart go cur le chéile.

Football's coming back

The new League of Ireland season begins on Friday, February 12, when Shamrock Rovers take on Dundalk in the President's Cup at Tallaght Stadium. This game will, of course, take place behind closed doors as will the SSE Airtricity Men's Premier Division fixtures the following weekend and the SSE Airtricity Men's First Division and Women's National League which commence on March 26th and 27th respectively.

It is a testament to all involved that we are permitted to resume our League of Ireland football at adult level in the coming weeks and I want to commend all those who made our game so COVID-19 free in 2020. Like those working behind the scenes at all levels of the game, the dedication of our volunteers at senior level have facilitated our sport's return to competitive action this month, the first new season for any sport in Ireland in 2021.

It is vital now that we all continue the hard work to ensure football can return for everyone at the earliest possible opportunity. The League of Ireland return will set the standard for the rest of the game to follow and I am confident that our Government will recognise this as we look to a return for all facets of the game in conjunction with the Expert Medical Group, the HSE and Sport Ireland.

Speaking of the League's return, may I commend SSE Airtricity for renewing their sponsorship and welcome Bank of Ireland on board as Associate Sponsors of the League of Ireland and the FAI Cup and also as title sponsors of the really impressive More Than A Club programme.

I would also like to express my personal delight at the return of WATCHLOI for Premier Division football and the launch of LOITV for live coverage of the Men's First Division and Women's National League.

These are really exciting times for League of Ireland football. Our thanks to Mark Scanlon and his team in the League of Ireland department and the very best of luck to all the teams as the new season approaches.

World Cup year is here

Our CEO Jonathan Hill has made reference in recent weeks to the very special relationship between Ireland fans and the World Cup, a relationship that has blossomed across 1990 in Italy, 1994 in America and 2002 in Japan and South Korea. Jonathan has also spoken about the very unique situation in 2021 when Stephen Kenny's Ireland team will play all their Group A qualifying games for the FIFA World Cup 2022 in the one calendar year, beginning with the fixture in Serbia on March 24th. The games against Portugal, Serbia, Azerbaijan and Luxembourg promise to recreate that World Cup fever and I would like to wish Stephen and his assistant Keith Andrews, new coaches Dean Kiely and Anthony Barry and the players all the best for the games to come.

I am also delighted that Vera Pauw has agreed a contract extension with the FAI and will lead our Women's National Team later this year into their World Cup qualifying series for the 2023 finals in Australia and New Zealand. Vera has built on all the good work of the past and brought our women's team forward in so many ways and I know there are really exciting times ahead for our senior team and for the Women's game in Ireland.

I must also wish Jim Crawford and the next generation of Under 21 footballers well as they begin their year with a friendly away to Wales in Wrexham on March 26th. With so many of our teams still idle at international level due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we wish Jim and his players and staff well going into their new season with the Euro qualifiers to come in the autumn.

Don't Scroll By

Social media has been in the news for all the wrong reasons of late and we have offered our full support to James McClean, Shane Duffy and Jonathan Afolabi in light of the horrific abuse targeted at them and so many others in football. There can be no place for such behaviour in our sport and I am delighted to tell you that the FAI are supporting the Olympic Federation of Ireland's Don't Scroll By Campaign. This campaign calls on the public and sporting stakeholders nationwide to adopt a zero-tolerance approach to online abuse, discrimination and hate speech, and to #DeleteBanReport any of this type of commentary they witness online. 'Don't Scroll By' is a clear and strong statement

that there is no place for online abuse, discriminatory comments or hate speech on social media channels in Irish sport.

Along with our support for our players and their families, many of them are also making their own contributions and working with Des Tomlinson, our National Intercultural Programme Co-ordinator, on so many issues. Only recently Cyrus Christie and Adam Idah took time out to speak at a Douglass Week event in Cobh to celebrate the legacy of Frederick Douglass and their input was greatly appreciated by all involved and by all who attended.

Des is also working on new Racism and Discrimination policies which will be presented to Board in the coming weeks and I thank him and our staff for all their efforts in this area.

Football and Social Responsibility

As part of the Association's commitment to football and social responsibility, enhancing and compliment the wide-ranging social impact that football brings to communities up and down the country, we are developing a football and social responsibility strategic plan.

The plan's development will follow the UEFA 7 step Football and Social Responsibility strategy development roadmap process, with a crucial step in this process being our engagement with stakeholders through wide ranging consultation that will ensure that the plan is informed by and reflects the voice of our key stakeholders. Work has already started on the stakeholder consultation process. Some key areas of social responsibility include health and well-being, inclusion, diversity and equality, supporting environmental sustainability, community engagement, stakeholder relations and much more.

Coaching goes online

The FAI Coaching Pathway continues to produce great coaches and this has been recognised by UEFA with Head of Coach Education Niall O'Regan recently presenting to the 54 member associations as part of a UEFA best practice webinar series on how to design a coaching pathway, reflecting the positive work being done in the creation of the 2021-2025 coaching pathway.

During Covid 19, our coach education department has adapted to online learning, with the delivery of course theory components online and the use of video evidence for some of the practical requirements. Since October 2020 to February 2021 some 3,000 Grassroots coaches around the country have completed Grassroots courses online. The Professional UEFA Licences 2020 courses at UEFA Pro, Elite Youth A, A Licence and B Licence are ongoing, while the 2021 UEFA Licences have commenced.

FAI to Trial Concussion Substitutes

Our application to trial concussion substitutes in the upcoming League of Ireland season has been approved by the International Football Association Board (IFAB) and will come into effect at the President's Cup meeting of Shamrock Rovers and Dundalk at Tallaght Stadium on Friday, March 12.

FAI Medical Director Dr Alan Byrne has produced an information video for players, coaches and supporters ahead of the trial period and recently updated club medical staff and management on

Protocol B during a virtual conference ahead of the new season. This is available, along with all our COVID-19 protocols, at www.fai.ie

Sports Capital and Equipment Programme

The Sports Capital and Equipment Programme 2020 (SCEP) saw the largest number of applications ever submitted with 3,106 applications seeking funding of over €200million. Football had its own record with 508 submissions, which highlights a 96% increase on the previous funding programme back in 2018.

The record number of applications from Football was extremely positive to see, following a new educational initiative from Walter Holleran and the FAI Facility Development Department for all stakeholders on the benefits of the Sports Capital and Equipment Programme, and the application process. With the help of the FAI Grassroots staff, this ensured this message was delivered successfully to all four corners of the country.

Sport Ireland update

I recently attended a meeting with the Board of Sport Ireland alongside our chairperson Roy Barrett and Chief Executive Officer Jonathan Hill and I have to tell you that Sport Ireland are really positive about the ongoing governance changes at the FAI ahead of our EGM at the end of the month and the election of a General Assembly and new Board etc.

The transformation at the FAI was commended at the meeting and special mention was made for our recent submission as a national governing body on a return to sport for everyone in the country, not just football. The submission covered all strands of the game and, combined with the recent grassroots survey carried out by Ger McDermott and his team, has done so much to inform Government and Sport Ireland of where football is at this point in time in the pandemic and where we need to go. After so many headlines in recent years, I have to admit it was a pleasure to hear Sport Ireland commend the work we are all undertaking together to reform the FAI. Long may it continue.

Remembering those who have left us

So many great football people have passed away since I last addressed you as President and I would like to take this opportunity to remember Liam Farrell, one of the great characters of schoolboy football in Dublin. A founder member of the North Dublin Schoolboys League and President at time of his death, Liam was chairman of the SFAI and a delegate to so many FAI committees and Council over the years. Our condolences to Liam's many family and friends and also to the families of Jimmy Hackett in Wicklow, Peter Maher in Kilkenny and Willie O'Callaghan in Waterford.

We also remember Bobby Wade of Bohemians, Finbarr O'Shea from Cork City, Willie Curran of Derry City, Dundalk's Colm Crossan and Teddy Lambe and the League of Ireland legend that was Ben Hannigan of Shelbourne, Shamrock Rovers, Cork Celtic and Dundalk during a stalwart career. Des McAleenan, an Irish born coach with Colombia, also died recently.

It is also timely to remember young players who have died recently including Josh Dunne of St Kevin's Boys and Bohemian FC, Rian O'Halloran of Shelbourne and Ballynanty Rovers in Limerick and James Harrison of Knocknacarra in Galway.

And finally, a word for Ireland supporters Kenneth Murdock from Cliftonville and Dean Archbold, a huge Bray Wanderers fan and a member of our Ballybrack Seagulls Supporters Club. They followed Ireland through thick and thin and I know they will be with us in spirit on our upcoming World Cup journeys with Stephen and Vera.

Ar dheis Dé go raibh a n-anamacha dílse.

Slán go fóill.

*Stay safe and well.
Gerry.*



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