

Finn



McCool's



FOOTBALL CLUB



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THE BIRTH, DEATH, AND RESURRECTION OF A
PUB SOCCER TEAM IN THE CITY OF THE DEAD

STEPHEN REA



PELICAN PUBLISHING COMPANY

GRETNA 2009

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Rea, Stephen.

Finn McCool's Football Club : the birth, death, and resurrection of a pub soccer team in the city of the dead / Stephen Rea.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-58980-641-2 (hardcover : alk. paper) 1. Finn McCool's Irish Pub (New Orleans, La.) 2. Soccer teams—Louisiana—New Orleans. 3. Irish Americans—Louisiana—New Orleans—Social life and customs. 4. Hurricane Katrina, 2005. 5. Hurricanes—Louisiana—New Orleans. 6. New Orleans (La.)—Social conditions. 7. New Orleans (La.)—Environmental conditions. I. Title. II. Title: Birth, death, and resurrection of a pub soccer team in the city of the dead.

GV943.6.F47R43 2009

796.334'620976335—dc22

2008046591



Printed in the United States of America

Published by Pelican Publishing Company, Inc.
1000 Burmaster Street, Gretna, Louisiana 70053

To my grandfathers, Billy Meharg and David Rea.
They taught me that soccer can bridge any
generation gap, knowledge I still use today
with the younger members of our team.

Contents

	Acknowledgments	9
	Prologue	11
CHAPTER 1	Macca	21
CHAPTER 2	Frank the Tank	29
CHAPTER 3	Coming to America	37
CHAPTER 4	Living in America	45
CHAPTER 5	Let Me Play, Buddy!	55
CHAPTER 6	I Like to Watch	67
CHAPTER 7	Finn McCool's	77
CHAPTER 8	And So It Begins	85
CHAPTER 9	Mardi Gras	93
CHAPTER 10	Home Is Where the Heart Is	103
CHAPTER 11	Our First Game	113
CHAPTER 12	Our First Victory	121
CHAPTER 13	We Hit a Pothole	129
CHAPTER 14	Gringo Ken	139
CHAPTER 15	An Eight-Goal Thriller	149
CHAPTER 16	The Calm Before the Storm	157
CHAPTER 17	Landfall	167
CHAPTER 18	Katrina By the Numbers	177
CHAPTER 19	The End of the World as We Know It	179

CHAPTER 20	You Need Friends.....	187
CHAPTER 21	The Healing Power of Soccer	193
CHAPTER 22	Think You've Got It Bad?.....	203
CHAPTER 23	Journey to the City of the Dead	213
CHAPTER 24	Texas (Will) Hold 'Em.....	225
CHAPTER 25	I Like to Watch: Part Two.....	233
CHAPTER 26	Benji to the Rescue	243
CHAPTER 27	Through the Looking Glass	251
CHAPTER 28	Trip(s) Home	261
CHAPTER 29	The Bag Boy	275
CHAPTER 30	Click Your Heels Three Times	283
CHAPTER 31	The Surreal Life.....	291
CHAPTER 32	The Real Life.....	301
CHAPTER 33	Rebuild. Recover. Re-New Orleans. . .	309
CHAPTER 34	FEMA McCool's	317
CHAPTER 35	The End Game.....	323
	Epilogue.....	327

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the following people.

My family: Nicola, my mum Linda, dad Billy, grandmothers Sadie and Jean, Carol, Anne, William, Rachel, Tavares, and Sandra.

In Northern Ireland: Matthew Crozier, Doug and Victoria Ferguson, Patrick Griffin, Simon Lowry, Neil and Sharron McKeown, Conrad and Julie Smyth, Neil Warburton, and Brian and Lorraine White. I think about y'all often.

In the USA: Martha Heckman, Denny and Michael Guarracino, Joe and Sam Guichet, Mike Inez, Patricia and Tom Schoenbrun, Mark Southworth, Leslie and Richard Wilson, and Beatriz and Ray Ziegler. You helped us settle. Special mention for Dawn and Gordon Sheals.

Around the world: Lizzy and Peter Acheson, Jo and Paul Bolton, Gloria and Terry Butler, Tony Dennis, Gurbir Dhillon, Dave Feldstein, Fay Gould, Ange and Pete Licalsi, Roger Lowry, Brian and Harvey McKibbin, Ozzy and Sharon Osbourne, Jason and Sara Patterson, Rachel and Steve Scully, Joe and Louise Thompson, and Keith Willey. Thank you for enriching my life and opening your homes.

Gone but not forgotten: Randy Castillo, Mark Putterford, and Bobby Thomson.

For your kindness after Katrina: Jackson Collins, Anne Marie Fraback, Bill and Karin Hamilton, Kenny McClure, and Kevin Palmer. We will never forget it.

Extra-special thanks to Annie Cunningham, Blair Harvey,

10 FINN McCOOL'S FOOTBALL CLUB

Sharon Miles, and my fairy godmother Lynn Seager-Putterford for your confidence and inspiration.

Not in the book but in Finn McCool's: Hubie Collins, Aidan Gill, Ashleigh Gros, Janel and John Lamkin, Patrick Pocock, Daithi and Michelle Robb, and Lynda Woolard, who took the back-cover photo. Where would I go if you weren't there? And the best bar staff in the world: Carolyn, Dawn, Joann, Katie Jean, Keith, Marie, and Taemee. I'd particularly like to offer sincere heartfelt thanks to Stevie, Stephen, and Pauline – without "youse" there would be no book.

Thanks to Ian McNulty who took the photo of the flooded Finn McCool's at the beginning of this book.

To all Finn McCool's FC players, coaches, and fans from the past, present, and future, thank you for carrying the torch. I am extremely grateful to all of you who graciously gave up your time to be interviewed, and I want to single out Benji, whose match reports were an entertaining and invaluable source of reference.

Lastly but most importantly, I owe more thanks than anyone can ever imagine to my beautiful wife, Julie. The irony of her incredible support as I wrote a book about a game she hates is not lost on me.

So this book is for Julie. She advised me, backed me, supported me, encouraged me, believed in me – and only occasionally told me to get a job.

Prologue

8:55 A.M.

Saturday, August 27, 2005

I arrive at Finn McCool's Irish pub on Banks Street in Mid-City.

It's a typical summer's day in New Orleans. A cloudless cobalt sky. Not yet nine and already in the eighties. During the ten-minute drive from my home on the edge of the Garden District, our twelve-year-old Ford Escort had creaked and groaned as it strained to cope with the air conditioning blasting at full power. The oppressive heat will creep up all day, reach 98 degrees in the late afternoon, then mercifully cool down slowly, like a saucepan lifted off the burner.

Finn's is a remodeled wooden Creole home in a residential area. It's not much to look at from the outside. Parking is sometimes tight. It's a "mixed" neighborhood. In Northern Ireland, where I'm from, that means an area inhabited by both Protestants and Catholics, but here it refers to blacks and whites. There are a few Hispanic families too.

The surrounding streets might euphemistically be labeled "sketchy." At night you'd want to be careful. Two weeks ago someone tried to rob our towering Dutch player Frank "the Tank" Komduur. He must have been out of his head on crack. No clear-thinking mugger would tackle giant Frank.

The front door is three steps above street level, the usual defense against flooding in the city. Inside it's cool and dark. My eyes take a second to adjust after the blinding blue

outside. I fan my polyester Chelsea replica shirt, already damp from sweat.

Finn's is a million miles from the Disney-fied version of many Irish bars in America. There are no needlework harps, Guinness tea towels, or plastic green leprechauns. It's more like a Belfast workingmen's social club than Rosie O'Grady's in Orlando. I could be in Dundalk or Donaghadee, County Down, or County Clare. Finn's is the real deal.

Stephen Patterson, one of three owners, glides back and forth behind the twenty-foot-long polished wooden bar like a shark. He never stops and is always serving people or washing glasses or emptying ashtrays. He grabs a frosted beer mug from the tall white fridge behind him, which has a couple of magnets stuck to the door. Next he reaches for a bottle from the hard liquors alongside. There's a decent two-shelf range but it's not the showy glass pyramid of obscure vodka brands you find in flashy yuppie joints. Above him a framed drawing of a smiling World War II GI holding a steaming mug asks, "How about a cup of shut the f—k up?" A handwritten sign on a strip of cardboard reads, "Wee pizza—\$3." Packets of Tayto potato chips imported from the old country hang drunkenly from a display. One of those big old black rotary phones is mounted halfway up the wall.

He pours coffee into a small brown porcelain cup for me. Some of the lads start drinking as early as 6 A.M. when they watch games, but there's no way I could face alcohol at this hour. He hands me milk in a small plastic to-go cup. The staff also use them when you have been bought a drink you aren't ready for: they are placed upside down on the bar to signify you have one "in the well" and often you'll have three or four stacked up in front of you. Regulars can keep them until the next visit, as they keep a record behind the bar.

There are about eight customers and I sit between our soccer team's assistant coach Robert "Big Rab" Nelson and forward Benji Haswell. Big Rab, thirty-seven, is a ship designer from Scotland who is six feet, four inches tall and weighs almost three hundred pounds. He's been "on the wagon" for a week and is the only one following the Scottish soccer game between Rangers and Hibernian on one of the two TVs above the bar.

My team Chelsea are playing Tottenham Hotspur in the English Premiership on the other set. South African Benji, thirty-four, is a landscape gardener who supports Tottenham (known as "Spurs"), and although he already looks drunk, he claims his bloodshot eyes are because he stayed up until 3 A.M. watching rugby.

This half of the building is long and narrow. Facing the bar are two electronic gambling machines and a jukebox, and this part of the room is so tight that if someone is picking a song while a drinker is on a stool at the bar opposite, you have to excuse yourself to squeeze past. There's also a black metal table and four plastic chairs, and some Saturday nights a beautician sits here and will do your nails for ten dollars. Today there's just a pack of leaflets about pension rights for British ex-pats.

As the Chelsea game kicks off, I head to the men's restroom in the corner of the pub. As there's only one toilet, you often have to queue outside the rickety door and along the side of the bar, but it's free at the moment. I've no time to write a taunting soccer message on the blackboard above the sink.

Another blackboard above the front door advertising forthcoming events reads: "September 17—Halfway to St. Patrick's Day Party." On the way back to my seat I pass two small black-and-white photographs of the Giant's Causeway in Ulster's County Antrim on the wall at eyelevel. They're

maybe six inches by four inches and I didn't notice them for months.

Our team captain Paul Medhurst is standing beside my chair when I return. The rotund forty-two-year-old bank manager is another Spurs fan and is talking to fellow Londoner Steve Scully. Because there are so many regulars called either Paul or Steve, these two are known as Medhurst and Scully. Scully follows the London club Arsenal but is rooting for Spurs today because he wants title favorites Chelsea to lose. He'll be thirty-three on Monday and when he gets drunk he does a funny little dance in front of the jukebox. When I say he should be ashamed of cheering for his bitterest rivals he replies, "My enemy's enemy is my friend."

Also sitting at the bar is our English midfielder Paul Daley, a twenty-nine-year-old oilfield manager from Nottingham, and our pocket-rocket star striker Billy Dwyer, a school counselor and (unusual for our team) a New Orleans native. He's hung over; he turned thirty yesterday and was out celebrating until late last night. It hasn't stopped him this morning from going straight for the beer though.

Stephen carries a box of glasses from the other side of the pub, a large space about twenty feet by forty feet with doors for the ladies' restroom and the storeroom. There's a dartboard, a Foosball table, a pool table, and a bunch of tables and chairs. If there is a large crowd for an important match, Stephen pulls down a roll-out big screen. Posters and flags hailing the Scottish club Celtic are scattered around the walls, as Stephen is a fanatical fan still smarting from the previous week's defeat to archrivals Rangers.

A corkboard hangs on the pillar between the two parts of the pub. Pinned onto it is a poster listing the games for the Shell Shockers (the city's minor league soccer team),

a schedule for the bar kickball league, news about the book club, and a few snapshots of laughing barmaids and dressed-up drinkers. The obituary of a regular clipped from a newspaper seems almost comic in this incongruous setting. The dominating item is a blown-up photograph of Finn McCool's Football Club taken four months earlier after our first-ever match. We all look incredibly happy.

We watch Chelsea and Spurs while discussing our own game against local team Olympiakos at 6 P.M. tomorrow. We've entered the second division of the Southeastern Louisiana Adult Soccer Association and the season starts in two weeks. It'll be the first competitive eleven-a-side game many of us have played in years—in some cases decades. At training just thirty-six hours ago we filled the last two places in our twenty-two-man squad. We can't wait for the kickoff.

But some of the boys are apprehensive about taking on Olympiakos. They have ex-professionals, semiprofessionals, and professional coaches. And never mind the second division; they've been first division champions for the last six years. Our forty-six-year-old defender Dave "the Rave" Ashton challenged one of their players to the game in a drunken moment of bravado, but our goalkeeper is out of town and we're missing other key players. The fear is we'll be heavily defeated. But Medhurst is bullish. He reckons they haven't started preseason training and we'll catch them cold.

Then Billy says: "With this hurricane the game will be called off anyway."

I mean to ask him to explain, but I'm distracted by a Chelsea goal and a red card for Spurs player Mido. At halftime our stocky midfielder Graeme Shand, like Big Rab a Scottish ship designer, arrives. He comes over to me and enquires, "Stevie, can you sing?"

"Why?" I say.

"Because I thought you might like to sing me 'Happy Birthday'."

He's thirty-seven today but refuses my offer of a beer because he was hammered last night and is determined to stay sober. Big Rab congratulates him then leaves to get a haircut. Stephen will tape the second half of the Rangers match for him to watch when he returns.

On his way out he holds open the door for our English midfielder Andy Smith, thirty-four, an oilfield engineer from Grimsby nicknamed the Ginger Whinger because he's constantly moaning. He orders a Harp and says, "I've just been helping the girlfriend evacuate her horse. Would you believe it cost six hundred bucks?"

Should we be worrying about the approaching hurricane? It has crept up on us, come in under the radar. Even my wife, Julie, normally ultracautious about storm warnings, hadn't mentioned it this morning and had gone shopping. Benji has lived here longer than me and his wife, Shawn, is from Louisiana so I ask him.

"It's going to be fine, dude. I have friends that will tell you there's no way New Orleans will ever get hit by a hurricane; it's all to do with the mouth of the Mississippi and wind direction and stuff. Shawn is out of town this weekend and I'm not going anywhere. It'll be alright. If those pussies Olympiakos don't turn up then it means we win."

I turn my attention back to the soccer. Ulsterman Ivan Sproule's hat trick for Hibernian to defeat Rangers has yet another Scot, Celtic supporter Steve "Macca" McAnespie, rubbing his hands in glee. Cackling Macca is the Shell Shockers player-coach and will be training us for five dollars per person per week when our season starts.

The rest of us watch Chelsea cruise to victory. A great start to the weekend and it's not even 11 A.M. Medhurst, Benji, and Scully complain about the referee. I gloat for a bit—I followed Chelsea for two decades before they won a trophy, but now I'm wallowing in their recent success—then we carry on talking about our match tomorrow.

Big Rab comes back and settles down to watch the remainder of the Rangers game. He's unaware we all know they lost 3-0. Every so often Macca innocently asks him what the score is. "Rangers are losing 1-0 . . . It's 2-0 now . . . Hibernian have just gone 3-0 up." Each time, Macca cracks up behind his back and we all laugh at the windup.

Physiotherapist Dave the Rave turns up in time to see his hometown team, Manchester City, play against Portsmouth in the English Premiership. He's just finished work and half-watches the game as we continue to discuss our match.

I leave at halftime. I promised Julie I'd be back by lunchtime in case she needs the car. I double-check the details for tomorrow. Meet at the pub at 5 P.M. If Olympiakos doesn't show, then we'll hold a practice session.

Benji orders another beer. He says: "We'll be there okay. We've nowhere to go, dude. We're a whole team of transplants and foreigners—where are we going to drive to? Ireland?" He laughs. I smile and pat him on the shoulder. I tell everyone I'll see them tomorrow.

But forty-eight hours later Finn McCool's was under water. Macca was fighting for his life on the roof of a flooded house.

And one week later we had no way of knowing if more than half of our squad was still alive.