Thierry Henry “Handball” - Ireland vs France 2009, football world cup spoils or was the world cup just spoiled?

Thomas Leydon and Clive Palmer

Research Preface

Whilst playing for France on national duties Thierry Henry’s controversial handball against the Republic of Ireland on Wednesday 18th November 2009 caused a media storm of heated debate. The ethics of this game were firmly in the spotlight for its on-pitch illegalities and the kangaroo court of justice seemed to be presided over by anyone who might have a vested interest in the verdict either way of the ruling. Was it handball? Maybe, perhaps, possibly... it depends. Within the rules of football it may only be handball if the referee sees it and even then such a decision may be subject to further interpretation. Was it accidental for instance? Only Thierry Henry may know this. Even if the referee did see something which appeared to be like handball, each match official and each player from both teams could have seen the event from different angles (or not at all in some cases) possibly leading to as many different interpretations of reality as there were people on the pitch. Then there are the media and public ‘judges’ watching feverishly on television sets all over the world all making their own decisions on whatever they think they saw, based upon whatever the cameraman chose to show them. The majority of viewers relying upon this second order broadcast of the event, i.e. those not spectating at the match itself, would have been served
up immediate repeats from numerous angles and in slow motion replay which may have merely reinforced their prejudices and/or allegiances towards their teams, the match officials and the players and particularly towards Thierry Henry himself. May be, he just played the game well, as any other player might do in such an instance? France were the victors in the first leg, winning 1-0 at Croke Park in Dublin. Ireland were 1-0 up in Paris, in the return leg after 103 minutes. The game had gone to extra time due to the tie being all square at 1-1 on aggregate. Robbie Keane playing for Ireland, had scored the goal that night which had upset many a passionate Frenchman who probably expected France to progress comfortably qualifying for the world cup finals in South Africa in 2010. After their first leg victory over Ireland, it seemed like the world cup spoils would be for France, and the world cup plans of Ireland would just be spoiled.

Back at Stade de France it looked like the tie was heading for penalties, until the 104th minute when the ball fell to Thierry Henry (FRA) in the Ireland penalty area. He controlled the ball twice with his hand before squaring the ball to William Gallas (FRA) who headed home. This sparked a massive celebration from the French players but even bigger protestations from the Irish. Their protests were to no avail and the goal stood. The referee had made his decision based upon what he saw. There was no way back for Ireland and the game ended up 1-1, with the French winning 2-1 on aggregate and earning their place in the world cup finals. The Irish were left devastated by the result. That seemed to be the end of the world cup for them. But arguing about the incident was just beginning and would gather pace in the following weeks. A simple search on the internet for “Thierry Henry handball” will reveal the high degree of attention this [now] historic moment in football has received, with many impassioned memories stirred from Diego Maradona’s (Argentina) Hand of God incident against England in the World Cup quarter finals in 1986.

After the France Ireland game there were seemingly not unreasonable calls for the game to be replayed. Ireland appealed to FIFA (world governing body for football: Fédération Internationale de Football Association) for the game to be replayed as they felt they had been cheated out of a place in South Africa. FIFA rejected Ireland’s appeal and there was a huge amount of frustration in the Ireland campaign over the affair. However, the Football Association of Ireland didn’t stop there. They once again appealed to FIFA but this time it was to request that they (FIFA) gave them a place in the
world cup finals by extending the number of teams in the competition from thirty two to thirty three. This was once again rejected out of hand by FIFA and this signalled the end of Ireland’s world cup hopes. FIFA then went on to announce that they were going to award Ireland with a special fair play plaque for what happened on that Paris night. This decision was met with disgust from Irish players, fans and officials alike. They felt that it was no consolation for missing out on the finals and that it was an insult rather than an award for being fair and honourable contestants (Hytner, 2009, James, 2009). In addition there have been numerous personal attacks on Thierry Henry that he was a blatant cheat (Cascarino, 2009) which may be unfair when one considers the wider range of implications that are possible to envisage. For example, might Thierry Henry have cheated on behalf of a nation making the national team of France the cheats?; might have the referee cheated for some reason?; might have Thierry Henry played well within the rules and even if he did cheat on the field of play, which is debatable, it may not make him a cheat in life. His actions that day may not make him a bad role model to follow in the circumstances – sporting or otherwise (see for relevant discussions about the philosophical stance towards the playing of games and the possibility for moral development from them see: Suits, 1972, 1995; D’Agostino, 1982; Reid, 1999; Jones and McNamee, 2003; Wellman, 2003; McFee, 2004; McNamee, 2008). The emotive language and the strength of the allegations in the media made against Thierry Henry and about his character “as a man”, seemed to constitute a vicious personal attack, for example, “Thierry Henry is an insincere cheat who has tarnished his reputation for good” (Cascarino, 2009). This would appear to be very upsetting for any person to bear least of all perhaps for one who has dedicated his life to playing his sport well, particularly when representing his country. If one accepts that playing football may not be a full account living one’s life then the character assassinations in the press may be doing more harm than good for the “handball” situation, for football in general and in particular, for Thierry Henry.

The What If element in this story is what if Henry’s handball was spotted? It was interesting to consider what could have happened if an official had spotted the infringement and pulled the player up for it. I felt intrigued to consider what could have happened differently as a result. I decided to go with the idea that things would have happened very differently if the goal had been disallowed. This strategy seemed to have the potential to make my
story as interesting as possible and more entertaining for the reader. I think the idea that things in life could be very different had it not been for one tiny event is very interesting and one that appeals to me. It goes to show how small margins can cause huge differences and had that goal by France not counted then Ireland could possibly have qualified for the world cup finals. As an Englishmen watching the game, I was rooting for Ireland as I was curious to see how they would do in the finals. I, along with many others was disappointed when they failed to qualify, especially in the circumstances that it happened. Therefore, I saw this as an opportunity to explore the curiosity I felt and perhaps develop a sense of curiosity which a reader might feel about this story.

One layman’s theory in football is that the stronger nations may be favoured by FIFA. For example, that FIFA rejected Ireland’s appeals for a replay of the match or a place in the finals because they are a smaller footballing nation and were perhaps unlikely to do very well in the finals anyway. One conspiracy theory is that ‘what if’ it had happened the other way round? Would FIFA’s decision have been in favour of Ireland? The belief seems to be that if it had been an Ireland player who had handled the ball in the run up to the goal then they might have been more understanding towards the French’s pleas. Some common conjecture amongst ‘public experts’ is that the French have a lot of power in FIFA, that they influence FIFA’s decisions and are favoured by FIFA generally. Anglo-French relations over football have never been so ‘cordial’!

In researching for this creative story the incident was watched back time and time again in order to visualise how the “what if” story might fit around the actual events. The incident was on all news stations and all over the internet by the next day so there was a good deal of information on the topic to supplement the writing and give a sense of being there. The Portable Creative Writing Workshop book by Pat Boran (2005) was used to develop a writing style which helped to identify characters and to communicate the outcome of the story with a sense of drama. Reading this book really helped me to understand a way in which I could tell my story but in an attractive way for the reader. I also spoke to a number of very passionate Irish football fans to get their views and thoughts on the whole incident. This in itself was an interesting experience and helped to stimulate the sense for conflict and injustice which seemingly, any good story might need.
References


Suits, B. (1972) What is a game? (pp. 16-22). In, Gerber, E.W. (Ed.) *Sport and the body, a philosophical symposium*. Lea and Febiger, Philadelphia, USA.


IT ALL STARTED FOR THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND’S National football team on the 6th September 2008 in Mainz, Georgia. For the Manager of Ireland, Giovanni Trapattoni, it was his first competitive match in charge and he was hell bent on getting off to a winning start.

“OK lads, this is our first step on the road to South Africa. Let’s make it a winning start shall we?” said Giovanni. A collective roar went up from the Irish players huddled in the away changing room. Most of them were used to the modern facilities provided by the English Premier League clubs, so these rather grubby surroundings in post-Soviet Georgia were a slight culture shock to them. The players then bustled their way through the tunnel and out into the cold night air which seemed to shock them into a new level of consciousness. Captain Robbie Keane gave some words of encouragement to his team mates shortly before kick-off. The World Cup in South Africa in 2010 was the aim of everyone in the Ireland camp. Two hours on and the players returned to the changing room tired, muddy but in good spirits.

“Great performance! This is a tough place to come to, and to win 2-1 is just brilliant, well done, it probably could’ve been more but let’s not dwell on that” said Giovanni. He could always see an angle for more goals but felt it best not to focus on opportunities missed, particularly as it was time for the boys to be jubilant. He appreciated their success as much as anybody.

“Top game that lads, we should be proud. Bring on Italy”, said Robbie.
Giovanni hardly had time to enjoy the victory as he was whisked away to face the media.

“Giovanni, do you feel it will be yourselves, Italy and Bulgaria fighting it out for the top two places in your group?” asked one of the savage journalists.

“I feel we have a great chance of qualifying. Of course, we have the World Champions, Italy in our group and Bulgaria will be very tough. But let’s not rule out Cyprus, Macedonia and the Georgians, they’ll be tough also. And there are the French? I honestly believe there will be no easy games for us in this campaign” Giovanni replied.

It was a cold night in November in the Stade De France in Paris. The Irish turned up in hope rather than with the expectation that they might win. They were the underdogs.

“It’s been a long fourteen months since the first qualifier against Georgia, it will be a shame if it ends here tonight”. Giovanni said.

“We overcame the odds to finish second in the group behind Italy and we can overcome the odds tonight”. Republic boss, Liam Brady replied.

“It was so hard to take, losing the first leg play off to France, we deserved better, we can do better”, Giovanni said.

The teams play out the first half of the match...

“It was only 1-0, it’s still....” Liam said, before being interrupted by the door to the manager’s office swinging open, “five minutes till kick off” Coach Marco Tardelli announced to Giovanni.

Giovanni and Liam looked at each other and with no further words uttered; they walked into the changing room where they are greeted by a strangely quiet and tense Irish changing room. Giovanni knew his team needed him right now, this is what he gets paid for, what he had to say now could make or break a team’s morale. With the second half about to start his team had a mountain to climb if they were going to get to South Africa.

“Its half time boys, we’re one down but there’s a long way to go. Think about the people back home. Your friends and families, their hopes are in your hands. You can do this. Go out and make them proud”. Giovanni said.
“COME ON BOYS!” was the collective cry from the Irish players. They hurriedly stormed their way out of the changing room; each one of them was preparing to declare war on the French.

The cold Paris evening was not dampening the travelling Irish fans. The Irish team weren’t disappointing the fans either. Half an hour gone and the Irish have been on top, creating chances and the French seem shell-shocked. Giovanni is constantly screaming hurried messages at his players. Robbie was relishing his role as the Captain, he was leading from the front and dragging the Irish team forward.

The mood of the crowd reflected what was happening on the pitch. The Irish following was clearly up for the game whereas the mood amongst the French fans was quiet and sombre. It was hard to tell whether they were nervous or so arrogant that they didn’t see the need to whip up an intimidating atmosphere to help their side.

There was thirty two minutes on the clock when Kevin Kilbane (IRE) picked up the ball on the left hand side of the Irish midfield. Kevin was already beginning to feel the graft he had put in during the first half but this didn’t stop him playing a neat ball to Damian Duff (IRE). With the ball fast approaching the byline Damian heard a familiar cry.

“Damo! Pull it back, I’m here”, cried the ever demanding Robbie...

Damian sent an inch perfect pass into his team-mate’s path and he fired the ball past a static French keeper. The equaliser was in. The roar that went up was deafening. There were 81,000 spectators in the ground with only 3,000 of these being Irish fans and the amount of noise generated by them after that goal could easily get passers-by thinking the home side had scored.

“You beauty!” Keith Andrews (IRE) screamed as all the other jubilant Irish players piled on top of a heroic Robbie.

Pleased but still concentrating on the job in hand, Robbie interrupted the celebrations.

“Back in positions now lads, that’s just the equaliser”.

The Irish weren’t going to rest on their laurels and they kept the attack coming, looking to find the goal that would put them ahead. The French,
shocked by the battle they were being faced with were forced into life and were forced to stand up to the Irish onslaught.

There was 103 minutes on the clock.

Giovanni was talking nervously to Liam, their eyes locked on the action.

“We’ve done well to get to extra time, all we need is one final push…”

Giovanni paused immediately at the sight of Thierry receiving the ball in the Irish box, he controlled it and knocked the ball across the face of goal where his team mate William Gallas (FRA) was waiting gratefully to nod the ball home.

“HAND BALL!” the Irish players screamed as the opposition ran off celebrating. The protests were as frantic as the French celebrations were jubilant. The entire Irish contingent surrounded the dumbfounded referee who had pointed to the centre circle.

“The Linesman’s flag’s up”. An Irish player cried.

Seeing this, the referee raced over to converse and in quick time the referee called Thierry over and issued him a swift booking for handball and proceeded to give Ireland a free-kick. The tables were turned, suddenly it was the green shirts that were celebrating while the blues were in disbelief at what had just happened. Champagne was flying all around the visitors changing room. South Africa here we come.

“We’re there” exclaimed Keith, as the singing and dancing around him was becoming more raucous, in a manner which only Irishman who are going to the World Cup finals in South Africa might know how to. They all came to an echoed hush as they realised what was on the over-sized television screens provided for France’s visitors. The streets of Irish cities were lined with jubilant fans celebrating their team’s victory.

The Johannesburg sun was burning down on the pale skins of the thousands of Irish fans who were congregated in the Soccer City stadium. The day was the 11th July and the final of the World Cup was why they were all there. The Irish faithful surely still had the dramatic 3-2 victory over England in the semi finals on their minds. Today, it was business. Underdogs for the whole campaign, they have continued to defy the odds.
and have one hurdle left to overcome and they will be world champions. This obstacle was Brazil.

The dressing room was less boisterous than in previous matches. The Irish had gone into every game as ‘odds on to lose’ and approached each game feeling no pressure. This time it was different. They would step into the South African sun with all eyes on them and an expectant audience. This was their time. This was their chance.

The Brazilians began the match with the expected flair and imagination that is associated with them, they were running circles round the Irish. The usual effort and determination was still clearly there from the eleven Irishmen but they couldn’t get to grips with the samba flair of their world class opponents.

Desperate cries could be heard from the underdog’s warriors, trying to spur their teammates on.

“We’re better than this Ireland, extra ten per cent from each of you” Robbie screamed in desperation after another close shave by the Brazilians. Wave after wave of attack right until ninety minutes was played with no score, but almost remarkably there was no way through for Dunga’s side.

Damian cleverly wins a corner in stoppage time, a chance for the Irish to kill a bit of time before extra time.

The ball is bouncing around the box, it’s flicked goal-wards and bounces of the post and precariously across the goal line. Robbie is battling to get himself to the ball first.

Commentators around the world go crazy at the dramatic circumstances unfolding before their eyes.

“It must be, surely, just a touch needed from Keane!”

Robbie battles and stretches to get to the ball. One touch is all he needs, poised and squaring himself to aim at the goal, it’s a sure thing. If he can just make contact with the ball, any part of his body will do then Ireland are the World Champions...

The ball hits his hand...