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John Doyle: My prediction for Irish team was on the ball -- but I wish it wasn't

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By John Doyle Monday November 21 2011

I WAS briefly famous on Twitter recently, for a prediction I made in 2007 -- "Ireland won't qualify for a major tournament until the economy collapses and everybody is poor again."

In 2007 I was then, as I am now, an Irishman and an arts columnist for 'The Globe and Mail' in Canada, but I was writing too about football, covering World Cups and Euros.

I was also writing a book about football -- the madness of football passion and the way small countries can be defined and elevated by success on the international football stage. I had good reason: in my life, as in that of so many other Irish people, Euro '88 and Italia '90 were defining moments.

So, that year I was in Dublin to see Ireland play a qualifying match for Euro 2008. This was the Steve Staunton era.

The night before the match I'd met a friend, Sarah, for a drink. I asked for her thoughts about the hopeless Irish qualifying campaign.

She said the national team was still in the grip of the "Ah, sure, it'll do" attitude. That was the one that used to define Ireland, before everybody wanted to be confident and rich.

I settled on Sarah's theme for what I'd write -- the Irish team under Mr Staunton exemplified the shambles Irish culture I had fled in 1980. I asserted that from Euro '88 to the 2002 World Cup, the success of the Irish team under Jack Charlton and Mick McCarthy represented and matched Ireland's journey away from that shambles, and into economic respectability and prosperity.

I said the performance of a national team was directly attributable to the dynamic of the country itself. Small countries seeking validation, strenuously trying to grow out of colonial status, do well. Like Ireland's team, for a while. I said Ireland would need to be a shambles again and want to overcome it, to succeed again.

My theory appeared in 'The Guardian', under the headline, "What the Republic needs now is an economic collapse." Abuse poured in.

My theory was dismissed as rubbish. Irish newspapers -- including this one -- heaped scorn on it. Irish radio stations invited me on-air to defend what one called "this preposterous thesis".

Last Tuesday I sat in a bar in Toronto and watched the 1-1 draw with Estonia, as I had watched the glorious 4-0 demolition of Estonia days earlier. Youngsters who had left

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Ireland recently, arriving in Canada on work visas and glad of it, surrounded me.

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In 2007 those young people might come to Canada for holiday, not desperately in search of work and money.

And I knew that just as Ireland needed a post-collapse bailout to bring some discipline and vigour back to its economy, the Republic of Ireland team needed the intervention of canny, conservative old Giovanni Trapattoni.

When qualification for Euro 2012 was secure, my 2007 article was widely circulated on Twitter. No abuse this time. What I got was "remarkably prescient". Yes, I was right. I wish I wasn't. But the country was too smug, too rich, and that raw rage to transcend the shambles and to succeed -- what had once propelled us and the team -- was missing.

Now it's back. Honest endeavour is back. The fundamentals of ball possession, solid defence and two wingers supplying the ball to two strikers. The most elemental system under the sun. Nothing reckless, just conscientious exertion.

Think about it -- all qualities that are required for Ireland to recover from the hangover of the Celtic Tiger boom and boondoggle of reckless lending and reckless spending.

If anyone wants my prediction about events in Poland and Ukraine I'll say this -- the use of the basics by Ireland will bring a 0-0 draw, a 1-1 draw and a 1-0 win in the first round. Progress to the second round.

After that you're on your own for betting. But remember, Trap once famously said of Greece (beware the Greeks, they have something to prove too) winning Euro 2004, "Greece won the tournament with three free-kicks and corner". The basics.

That's us now. The country and the team. Nothing reckless. We'll be grand. World Cup 2014 here we come. Listen, I was right before.

John Doyle, born in Nenagh, Co Tipperary and raised in Dublin, is a writer for 'The Globe and Mail' in Canada, and the author of 'The World is a Ball: The Joy, Madness & Meaning of Football'

- John Doyle

Irish Independent

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