

## Two countries aiming for a place in Russia

### Population

**NI** 1.85m **Ireland** 4.77m

### Stadiums

**NI:** Windsor Park, home of national team and Linfield. Capacity 18,434

**Ireland:** Aviva Stadium, formerly Lansdowne Road. Capacity 51,700. Also hosts rugby union internationals

### Domestic leagues

**NI:** Danske Bank Premiership, 12 teams. The current leaders are Coleraine

**Most successful team:** Linfield, 52 titles

**Ireland:** SSE Airtricity League of Ireland, 12 teams. Cork won the double last season

**Most successful team:** Shamrock Rovers, 17 titles

### Most caps

**NI:** Pat Jennings, goalkeeper 119 caps.

**Ireland:** Robbie Keane, forward, 146 caps.

### Top scorers

**NI:** David Healy 36 goals. Current squad: Kyle Lafferty 20 goals

**Ireland** Robbie Keane 68 goals  
Current squad: Jon Walters 14 goals

### Premier League players

**NI** 4

**Ireland:** 11

### Biggest transfers

**NI** Jonny Evans, Man Utd to West Brom, £6m

**Ireland:** James McCarthy, Wigan to Everton, £13m

### Managers

**NI:** Michael O'Neill, steered team to 20th in Fifa rankings

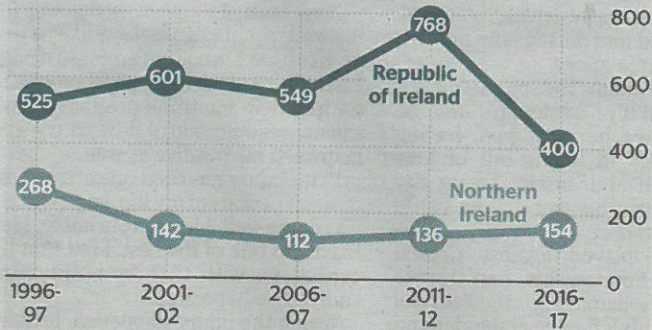
**Most successful** Billy Bingham, 15 years in the job, won Home Internationals in 1980 and 1984

**Ireland:** Martin O'Neill

**Most successful** Jack Charlton. Took Ireland to Euro 1988 and 1990 and 1994 World Cups

Words by Luke Chillingworth

### Irish Premier League appearances



far bigger crowds, are not in other European nations.

The feeling among many Le clubs is that their competition afterthought, with money steering national team. The argument, that without investment at club level, national team cannot hope to resurgence. Clubs ask where the next generation of international players will come from. Increasingly, apart from the option of exploiting the ancestral talent, the answer is the League of Ireland Premiership.

"Those who play over here for a while and then go over to England a little later in their career, the chance of making it, in my view, is much better. I'd leave at 16," Shiels says. "A lot of players come back at 19 and don't ever really make it after that."

"You look at what James McCarthy did. He was here at Derry. So was Shane Duffy. So was Niall McGinn [the Northern Ireland forward], who went to Celtic. But it's about investment in the league."

There are similar stories all over the world. Domestic leagues struggling as a result of the richest and most powerful clubs in the world, the League elite, reduce everything to a sideshow. This was always a challenge where English football is so popular. The challenges are far greater in the multimedia age. Then there is the challenge of football to compete with the other sports. The finals were watched by 82,000+ people at Croke Park and by millions on television. By contrast, there were only a few thousand at Aviva Stadium for last weekend's match, won by Cork City to complete the season.

Attendances in the NIFL Premiership are even more challenging. Just 2,111 people at Windsor Park to watch Linfield beat Drogheda. It will be a very different atmosphere when Northern Ireland take on Switzerland.

In Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, much hope is invested in the next generation of players. Those teams to keep competing, the next generation moves on and these success stories are over, the door is closed. It needs investment. World Cup qualification would bring a much-needed boost.