as Hamann sheds light on Corkman's thoughts during 'Grannygate'

ALL SMILES: Former Ireland international Ronnie Whelan with players and coaching staff from the project Futsal Hub in Ballymun

Ron a winner

RONNIE WHELAN reckons Giovanni Trapattoni could boot his homeland out of Euro 2012 next June.

Mark McCADDEN REPORTS

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One of the heroes of 1988, Whelan has backed the Boys in Green to cause another sensation on their long-awaited return to the European Championships.

The former Ireland and Liverpool midfielder scored one of the goals of the tournament 24 years ago in a 1-1 draw against the mighty USSR.

Looking ahead to this year's finals, Whelan dismissed the notion that the *Azzurri* are the threat many people are making out.

"People keep talking about Italy. They're ninth or tenth in the world but they're not playing like it," said the Dubliner.

"For me, they're not much better than Ireland. I'd be confident of getting a result and we've shown in the past we can do it (against Italy)."

Under Trapattoni, Ireland have picked up two World Cup qualification draws and a friendly win against Italy — the shock 2-0 victory coming in Liege last summer.

Cesare Prandelli's side progressed to the finals unbeaten from a group containing Estonia, Serbia, Slovenia, Northern Ireland and the Faroe Islands.

Yet they have suffered a number of set-backs — most notably the illness that has struck star striker Antonio Cassano.

Surgery

His six goals in ten qualifiers were crucial to their progress, especially as only he and Giampaolo Pazzini managed more than one strike in their campaign.

Cassano is currently recovering from heart surgery, and the Azzurri will need him if they are to break down an Irish side described by Whelan as "hard to beat."

When Ireland went to Euro '88 the team was packed with players from top sides like Liverpool and Celtic. That's not the case with the current set-up.

"Although players are not in top teams, they are a team with a structure. And that has got them through. They know what they're doing," said Whelan.

"Trap has them believing now. They believe in him because they are getting results and they are very difficult to beat.

"Three draws might be enough but we might sneak a win and a draw."

While Trapattoni's cautious style continues to be criticised, despite qualification, Whelan compares it to Jack Charlton's controversial long-ball tactics.

"Although we weren't 'great, we love this way of playing', we played that way and it got us through to World Cups and things like that," he said.

"We were hard to beat. Now this is a team that's hard to beat, and they believe in what they're doing.

"It's not going to be a case of 'we're going to be playing great football and we're going to beat everybody', because we're not. I think we all know how we're going to play.

"If we can pick a result up, a win against one of those three and a point somewhere, it's possible (to progress)."

Whelan has backed Keith Andrews' move to West Brom, and he reckons James McClean's style could see him nick a late spot on the plane to Poland.

INJURED: Cassano

"This lad McClean has come on the scene and for me he looks like a Trap player," said Whelan.

"He gets up and down the line, he's big, strong, he works hard, he gets good crosses in the box.

"He seems to ticks all the boxes for Trap."

'GIVE PARKER THE ARMBAND'

RONNIE WHELAN has revealed that he was singled out for abuse during his career — but that racism was never an issue within the Irish set-up.

Whelan spoke yesterday in the wake of the FA's decision to strip John Terry of the England captaincy — a move the ex-Ireland skipper believes could damage their Euro campaign.

"We never had any racist problems. I've been called an Irish so and so a million times, but things are different now," he said.

■ **MARK McCADDEN** reports

Chelsea defender Terry yesterday had to hand back the armband after his trial for alleged racial abuse of QPR's Anton Ferdinand was adjourned until July 9 — after the European Championships.

Former Ireland captain Whelan said: "Whether it's right or wrong (to take the armband from Terry) I'm not sure, because he hasn't been found guilty.

"It's a big call for them (the FA). It doesn't bode well for the squad or team, before the European Championships."

Whelan added: "If he plays, I'd go for Scott Parker.

"He's clean-cut and doesn't do anything wrong."

■ **RONNIE WHELAN was speaking yesterday at the official launch of the Ballymun hub of 'Project Futsal' — an EU-funded joint initiative between the FAI and the Welsh Football Trust (WFT).**

The scheme aims to utilise football as a social inclusion tool in order to facilitate innovative community regeneration.

■ **For more information, log onto www.ireland-wales.ie**

FA STALL ON JAM

JAMES McCLEAN must get approval from the English FA before his 'switch' from Northern Ireland to the Republic can be confirmed.

The Sunderland winger also requires the green light from the Scottish and Welsh FAs, as well as their Northern Ireland counterparts, before he can line out for Giovanni Trapattoni's side.

This is because FIFA now require a player's paperwork to be processed by ALL national associations with a potential claim on the individual.

And that could account for a delay in finalising his international swap, which could rule him out of this month's friendly against the Czech Republic.

In the past the paperwork had to go through any association that a player previously represented — and McClean lined out for Northern Ireland at Under-21 level.

Switch

Once the former Derry City ace declared his decision to switch allegiances, which he did last summer, he had to collate all the required documents.

These included evidence of his past appearances for Northern Ireland and of his eligibility to play for the Republic.

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■ From back page

"He will have players he wants to stay loyal to, those who've got him there through thick and thin, so somebody fresh wanting to get in might be difficult.

"But could he go there on merit? Absolutely. I see no reason why not."

Trapattoni and his assistant Marco Tardelli got a glimpse of McClean at Stamford Bridge last month.

The Irish coaches are fans of the wonder-winger, although Trapattoni has suggested recently that he would keep faith with the players who took part in the qualification campaign.

He did not entirely rule out a surprise promotion ahead of this summer's finals however.

O'Neill said: "I think the Irish coaches have been to watch him.

"They came to the Chelsea game and they couldn't fail to be impressed by him.

"Off the pitch he's a very quiet lad, and his family are very appreciative of

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