

Martin O'Neill interview: 'I'm about to become a grandfather, but I'm not done with management yet'



Martin O'Neill is looking for a return to club management

At some point in every manager's career there comes a time when people question whether they remain relevant, when the accusation is made their time has been and gone and that the game has moved on without them.

As Martin O'Neill prepares to become a grandfather for the first time, the sort of landmark event that tends to spark introspection, he realises he has reached this point, but he has no intention of winding down to spend more time with his family.

It has snuck up on him – 14 months ago he was hailed for securing the Republic of Ireland a World Cup play-off place, just two years after plotting their best European Championship campaign – but at the age of 66 and having lost that play-off heavily to Denmark, he knows his past achievements are now increasingly dismissed.

Where once his vast experience, the tried and trusted methods, were viewed as a strength, they are now used as evidence to argue he is a man out of step with his time.

He is, according to those who helped hound him out of the Ireland job, like a dial-up internet connection in a 5G age. A good manager, once, but one who has been overtaken by technology, ideas and younger rivals. His rebuke is a stinging one.

O'Neill has heard the criticism and read the slights. He has waited for this moment. He takes a sip from a cup of tea in the backroom of a hotel, just off London's Sloane Square, leans back in his chair and begins to dismantle the argument of those who wish to send him into retirement.

"I saw somebody the other day referred to Jose Mourinho as yesterday's man," O'Neill begins. "And he's actually won two trophies at Manchester United and finished second in the Premier League.

“Now, I'm not an apologist for Mourinho, far from it, but he's won two trophies and when you're managing at a top club, that is how you are judged. There are managers out there who have not won a single trophy in British football.



A number of Ireland fans had grown disgruntled with O'Neill CREDIT: PA

“I remember hearing the Chelsea players talking about Mourinho and about how well prepared he was, that wasn't long ago. He won the league with Chelsea three years ago, after winning titles everywhere else.

“Whilst there is always a new kid on the block, but then to find out that these things are supposedly dated now, I would probably feel the same sort of irritability [as him] about that.

“You can be labelled so quickly in this game. There is a footballing spiel now. We have to address these things.

“Seriously, high pressing, for example. It's a good term and it's one that's almost self-explanatory. Good. Fine. It wasn't called that some years ago. It was trying to dispossess the opposition as close to their goal as possible and then use your craft to create chances.

“I'd call that blue-collar working. Maybe that could be the new buzzword. The great managers get the really good players to be able to do that, get your top-quality players to do that heavy work, to do the blue-collar working when it's needed to be done. Good players, working hard, with creativity, that's the key to success. Always has been.”

O'Neill is just warming up. The Northern Irishman has always had sharp edges and an even sharper tongue, which he turns on those who have been bold enough, when speaking about him, to suggest they know more than he does about the modern game.

“When you don't talk about your philosophy or use words like project, you get labelled old fashioned,” O'Neill said, taking another sip from his tea. “I'm certainly not that.

“Let's put it this way, the game has changed. There's some aspects that have changed greatly, but there are also some aspects that remain the same.

“We all know these buzzwords, but they seem to be necessary to be fashionable. The fact that I didn't project those words, because I felt that the football language should be reasonably simple [counts against me].

“You know, there was some criticism in Ireland that I did not have a plan. We qualified for the Euros and reached the knockout stage for the first time. In the history of the World Cup and the European Championships put together, Ireland have qualified six times for those tournaments. I've been one of them.

“As fourth seeds, we then got to the play-offs for the World Cups, where we were well beaten, it has to be said, but if a goal against Austria had not been incorrectly ruled out [earlier in the campaign] we would have gone to the World Cup as group winners.



O'Neill has defended his time at the helm with Roy Keane CREDIT: REUTERS

“I don't think you could do that without a plan and strategy. You cannot do that without guile as a manager, tactics and a plan.”

So, what next for O'Neill? He is well aware of the fact that he is younger than three Premier League managers - Claudio Ranieri, Neil Warnock and Roy Hodgson - and just a year older than another, Manuel Pellegrini.

He wants to return to club management. He never intended to spend five years in international football, but the way it ended motivates rather than discourages.

“I genuinely think that you always have to have the mindset, that you have a point to prove,” he added. “Until the last day of your existence, you have a point to prove.

“That has always been the case with me, right from when I started out as a player. To have had the career I've had, you have to have that.

“I still possess that strong self-belief, I will always back myself. I will back myself in whatever job I take next.

“Maybe there is a perception now that am I not only too old, but that I’m on the outside looking in. There is an age element to it, there is a feeling that people believe you have closed your mind to things and it could not be further from the truth. My mind remains open.

“From my first year at Nottingham Forest, I was walking down the Trent Bridge to our training ground and I was talking to the youth team manager, Bert Johnson, who played for Charlton Athletic, and he was one of the best youth coaches around, a great man.

“I don’t know how we got to the conversation, but he told me this: ‘If you get a reputation for being an early riser you can lie in bed all day.’ It’s all about perception. I just think that is a brilliant quote and it has been proved to be absolutely correct. That’s the case more so than ever before in football.”

As one of Brian Clough’s former players, O’Neill has made no secret of his admiration for him, yet even that has been used against him.

“There was this idea during our time with Ireland that all Roy Keane and I did was sit around talking about Brian Clough,” O’Neill continued. “I might have mentioned mistakes I made a young player, but it simply wasn’t the case. Most of the players probably wouldn’t even know who Brian Clough was.

“But everybody has influences and it is handed down. All the great writers have influencers, it’s the same with coaches and managers.”

With that O’Neill is done, the final pot of tea is finished and a four-hour conversation draws to a close, but before he leaves, he turns his attention to his daughter Alana and the impending arrival of his first grandchild.

“I’m looking forward to it, it’ll be the first one and yes, maybe with Christmas as well, it’s a time for reflection and - I hate this phrase really - recharging of batteries and stuff like this.

“But really, I feel young, I’m ready and I’ve been involved with young people, with players in my managerial career for quite some considerable time. I don’t feel that that age should have anything to do with it. I’m ready to return.”