

Cathal Dervan

Voronin: Ireland are dangerous and must be respected

AN Irishman hit the headlines in Kiev yesterday but enough about Sean Quinn — the real story arrives today when Giovanni Trapattoni lands at Boryspil Airport just outside town.

Quinn's crumbling empire is under pressure in the Ukraine with his family's ownership of a shopping mall and business centre back in court here yesterday in just one of seven outstanding cases taken by the former Anglo Irish bank against his Swedish-based holding company.

The ordinary Ukrainian wouldn't know Quinn if he stood on the street in front of him. The same cannot be said of Trapattoni and the Italian will discover that much for himself tomorrow as the first Ireland manager in 24 years with a vested interest in the draw for the European Championship finals.

"Giovanni Trapattoni is one of the most respected managers in the world game," said the Ukrainian national team boss Oleg Blokhin, an old foe of the Italian's from his own days as one of Europe's top strikers.

"He is well known and liked in the world of football and it is no different in the Ukraine. We know him as a great manager and we will respect his team."

Keen to avoid Ireland and get their qualifier rivals Russia, Blokhin and star striker Andriy Voronin would prefer one of the other fourth seeds.

"Ireland will be dangerous, they will have to be respected," said Voronin whose appetite for a clash with Russia is fuelled by national pride.

"I want to play Russia. It would be a big, big game for everyone in the Ukraine as hosts and the emotion of it all would be an advantage for us."

Like Blokhin and Voronin, Ukraine's most famous footballer Andriy Shevchenko is keen to put the record straight on his country's behalf ahead of tomorrow's draw to decide who and where the 16 finalists will play next summer.

The perception in Ireland, and elsewhere, is that Poland presents a more amenable venue for players and fans alike but the Ukrainians are working hard to ensure that it will be right on the night come June.

They have already unveiled sparkling new arenas in Kiev, Donetsk and Lviv. The first of several new high speed trains will arrive from Japan later this month. Hotel chains have built 80 new hotels with 15,000 rooms to cater for fans.

Airports have been improved. Emergency workers, border guards and venue stewards have all received English lessons. Smoking will be banned in all stadia. A law has even been brought in to stop the execution of stray dogs – at Uefa's request!

"I think that in this difficult time the country has done everything possible to prepare for the Championship to the best of its ability," said former Chelsea star Shevchenko.

"And I think many more will be done in order to demonstrate the beauty of our country both to ordinary fans and participants of the competition."

One man who knows all about the Ukraine is Limerick native Seamus Holmes, Aer Rianta's main man at its Boryspil Airport duty free operation for the past 12 years. Labelled Kiev's best known Irishman by the locals, Holmes believes the Irish fans have nothing to fear if fate bases them in the former Soviet state and not Poland next summer.

"I think the Ukraine has been done a disservice back in Ireland," said Holmes.

"I know people have this idea that Poland will have a better infrastructure but they are working very hard here to get it right for the finals."

"It's a huge opportunity for the country and they know it. It's the biggest sporting event they've ever staged and probably the only thing that has ever come close to it before is the Eurovision.

"My advice to people is to come here and enjoy the country. Kiev will be a great base and if you can combine the football with a holiday on the Crimea then you will have a ball."

Already inundated with ticket requests before a draw drum is rotated, Holmes has officially run out of floor space in his Kiev home.

"As soon as the final whistle went in Estonia, I had dozens of people onto them, families and friends and some who claim they know me."

"I've told them they can sleep in the tents in the garden if they have to – so long as they bring the rashers and the sausages with them," he laughed.

Local organising committee spokeswoman Anna Dobko re-enforced the Irishman's infrastructure claims.

"The Ukraine has caught up with Poland, everything will be ready for the fans," said Dobko.

"We have the four stadiums finished, the transport works are almost complete and we are confident there will be enough accommodation.

"If Ireland plays here they will be very welcome and they will have fun. We can promise them that."