



# Soccer crisis hits Limerick

**A**FTER OVER half a century in the top flight of League of Ireland football, and its attendant high profile, Limerick City are now left to trade their skills in the more obscure First Division in the new season.

Instead of meeting glamour clubs such as Shamrock Rovers, Shelbourne, Dundalk, Derry City and Cork City, they must instead negotiate previously uncharted territory to such soccer outposts as Monaghan, Longford, Kilkenny, etc.

The joke is around that the club has been provided with maps of Ireland to assist them on their way.

The consequences are alarming. Supporters, for example, have become disillusioned and even the more committed are experiencing difficulty in dusting off the cobwebs as a new season approaches.

The image of the game has been dented in the region. The fall out is certain to be felt not alone in the city, but in such centres as Rathkeale, Newcastle West, Pallaskeenry, Holycross, Kilmallock, Cappamore and even Patrickswell, where soccer was taking root.

It is important that a city the size of Limerick should be in a position to compete with the best on the sport-field.

There is a contradiction that a city which claims to have more playing soccer per head of population than other centres, should now be consigned to the First Division.

And the pity is that Limerick City hardly seem sufficiently prepared to make a quick return.

The board of directors which assumed control earlier this year must be relieved of responsibility for the club's sad decline — for the moment at least.

They are still finding their way. They inherited problems galore, not least image. The predicament in which Limerick soccer now finds itself goes back a long time.

They traded for four decades without a home of their own. And then when the previous directors provided an alternative to the Markets Field, at Rathbane, it was rejected by the public.

**E**VEN IN their good days on the playing field, Limerick were never far away from crisis. Managers came and went. Indeed, Limerick dispensed with over a dozen in less than ten years, not the type of record to instill confidence in any club. Four years ago the *Limerick Leader* published a



Johnny Gavin, (extreme right, front row), a product of Limerick soccer, who became the first and only Limerick born player to have assisted Tottenham Hotspur. In the centre is Sir Alf Ramsey, who went on to become manager of England. This Spurs picture dates back to the 50s and was made available by Johnny's brother, Michael, who resides in Janesboro.

photograph of the playing staff. There were upwards of 36 in the group.

The future looked promising. All but a handful have since left Rathbane. Even success brought with it its headaches.

Limerick qualified for the European Cup a decade ago, when they met Real Madrid, and the then directors brought the game, against the advice of the local soccer populace, to Lansdowne Road.

Poor judgement was again shown shortly afterwards when after winning the League and FAI Cup in

After two years of struggle, when the club's future was often in doubt, the inevitable happened last Spring when Limerick failed in their bid to preserve Premier Division status.

The new directors, a consortium of local businessmen, were not too concerned that the trap door opened.

At least they now had the opportunity to build from scratch and try to get the club on a proper footing.

Had Limerick City won their battle for survival it

It is unlikely there will be any big signings at Rathbane in the foreseeable future.

One of the problems they are certain to encounter is that quality players will be reluctant to ply their trade with them in the lower division.

Already a few have left to seek fresh and more rewarding pastures.

And if they do discover a talented youngster locally the big fish will move in for the kill.

Limerick City need a cash flow and with 'gate' returns of £200 and £300 expected per fortnight, no

really serious they must open a direct line with those who stand out in the rain at Rathbane to lend them encouragement.

There is a fund of goodwill towards Limerick City. Even the rugby authorities extended the hand of friendship when they made Thomond Park available for the challenge games against Chelsea, Manchester City and Sunderland.

In the words of Branch treasurer Michael Wallace, they were delighted to come to their assistance.

Top of the priority list — and there are many —

the last decade.

But they cannot thrive unless the senior scene is healthy. The hype which surrounded Limerick's most successful years, from 1978 to 1982, was the spawning ground for many of them.

This could be a long winter for Limerick City. There will naturally enough be teething problems for the new directors as they come to grips with life in football management.

They need to be men of vision. Had they not arrived on the scene at a critical period last year then things might have been worse — no senior football in a city which pats itself on the back for its sporting background.

Pride has to be restored. That will be a long process. The Monaghans, Longfords and Cobh Ramblers of this world will not send supporters rushing to Rathbane, especially on wet Sunday afternoons.

But if Limerick City perform positively, the public will respond positively.

**T**HE businessmen who have taken on responsibility have shown commendable courage and deserve to be given ample time to put Limerick back on the international soccer map.

Initially, they will have to dig deep into their own reserves to keep the ship afloat, just as did others before them. But if they get their homework done properly the jigsaw might fit into place sooner than anticipated.

There will be a welcome for Limerick City when they make their way back. Nobody got any satisfaction watching them in decline. Even their staunchest competitors endeavoured to come to their rescue... alas, too late.

The soccer hierarchy in Dublin also want Limerick back in the big time and have promised to do everything possible to accommodate them.

A new image has to be cultivated by the board and a solid structure put in place. Otherwise, it will be back to square one again.

## LEADER PROBE

By JOHN O'SHAUGHNESSY

successive years, the then manager Eoin Hand was allowed to depart.

He had brought an air of stability to the game in Limerick and his hasty exit indicated instability within the club.

In truth, soccer in Limerick was never really on a sound footing. Directors never stayed too long, long term planning wasn't advocated, debts mounted and there were occasions when staff were unsure where their next pay packet was to come from.

The balance sheet for one particular season showed their only asset was a lawnmower.

In other words, Limerick were always good for a headline.

would probably have meant another nine months of desperation.

Now with the minnows they are at least in their own class, the wage structure can be pruned and they will be allowed get on with life without too much attention focussed on them.

The national media don't devote too much space to happenings in the First Division.

The directors will play it safe for a few months. They will not want to be seen to make mistakes. In the off-season they kept a low profile. While other clubs raided the transfer market, they preferred to re-negotiate with their existing panel.

serious bid is going to be turned down.

Already two of their members, Michael Kerley and Barry Ryan, have attracted the attention of Sheffield United and Arsenal, respectively.

If Limerick City are to survive then they must try to unearth saleable youngsters.

That's how the game is played. Such a policy may not go down well with those on the terraces but it is a fact of life they will have to accept.

The directors are making no promises. That is a realistic approach. Supporters have tired of unfulfilled dreams. Patience is now being called for.

If Limerick City are

must be to make Rathbane attractive to supporters. The place is very much run down.

Then a team capable of making it back to the Premier Division will have to be constructed. That may take time.

What must be realised is that the longer they are down the more difficult it will become for them to rejoin the elite.

Finn Harps, once one of the most progressive clubs in the League, have languished in the First Division for longer than most can remember.

There is a vast audience in Limerick city and county for soccer. Witness the number of clubs which have mushroomed over

# Telling the truth about political

IN THE issue of the *Limerick Leader*, Saturday, July 20th, your political columnist, Eugene Phelan's article "What's gone wrong with Fianna Fail?" was indeed both timely and relevant, as the party's demise in the Local Elections must indeed require quite a lot of in-depth examination and soul-

What's gone wrong with Fianna Fail?  
BY EUGENE PHELAN  
While they...  
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