

League Title Back After 20 Years

LIMERICK ARE CHAMPIONS

BY JOHN O'SHAUGHNESSY

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ST. MEL'S Park presented a magnificent sight at around 5.10 Sunday afternoon as thousands of delighted Limerick United fans, many of them overcome by emotion, defied the security blocks to chair their 13 white shirted heroes off the pitch following their historic 1-1 draw with Athlone Town, a result that was sufficient to give them their first league championship in two decades.

The joy and happiness which emanated from the faces of United's followers told the whole story. This was the day in which Eoin Hand's brigade had rightfully captured the greatest prize in Irish soccer and what made it all the more memorable was that they showed their character and steel in coming from a goal behind to get the point that was necessary if they were to wrestle the title from deadly rivals Dundalk.

Those who were privileged to watch this absorbing encounter will never forget the scenes when referee Mr. Pat Mulhall of Dublin sounded the final whistle. Pat Nolan buried his face in his hands; Eoin Hand went on his knees and Joe O'Mahony and Kevin Fitzpatrick, with a total of 35 years service to their credit, were seen to wipe the tears from their eyes.

Others were just caught up in the enthusiasm of the crowd and didn't have time to meditate on their achievement before being whisked off in the direction of the dressingrooms. "I have never seen anything like it before and it makes me proud that we should have been privileged to act as hosts on what must surely be an unforgettable day for Limerick football," said Athlone chairman, Seamus O'Brien, as he rushed to congratulate his Limerick counterpart, Michael Webb.

Long after the final whistle, United fans were still in the grounds and quite a few insisted on marking the occasion by taking souvenir items which they will no doubt refer to in the years ahead. It is not often that Limerick have provided us with such moments to savour, but this is one triumph which will be looked back upon with pride whenever sport is the subject.

The compact St. Mel's Park was the ideal setting for this finale to the season and the packed terraces generated a constant buzz of excitement befitting the event.

NO FAVOURS

Athlone Town, as promised, granted Limerick no favours. Their approach was thorough and professional and while some of their players may have openly admitted afterwards that they were delighted that a 20 year gap was bridged, they certainly didn't show any sympathy on the field of play.

The Midlanders played it tight and hard; their enthusiasm was obvious when Michael O'Connor floated a perfectly taken free kick past Kevin Fitzpatrick in the 36th minute, and the disappointment showed when Tony Meaney slotted that all important penalty to the left of Mick Smyth with just 20 minutes remaining.

In fact, pivot, Harry McCue, whose father captained Limerick to their last league success twenty years ago, almost spoiled the visitors' celebration plans in the 37th minute when it took a brave save by Fitzpatrick to prevent his blockbuster from entering the net.

Make no mistake about it, the Shamrocks won this one the hard way. There were times in the first half when the game seemed to be flowing away from them. Athlone, throwing everything into attack, thrived on hard work and such was their appetite for action that any neutral observer could have been forgiven if he thought it was they who had salvaged a point to take the championship.

Limerick, looking nervy and edgy, conceded no fewer than 16 free kicks in the opening 45 minutes, while gaining only three. Fitzpatrick was the busier of the two keepers and with Padraig O'Connor, Larry Wyse and Denis Clarke ticking over extremely well in midfield for Athlone, one wondered had Limerick set themselves an impossible task.

Then, coming up to the final 15 minutes of the first half, the visitors began to get the edge and putting their time together at last they looked as if they might, after all, succeed in their mission. But hearts sunk after Athlone sneaked in front and if hopes were raised again with a swashbuckling second half performance, the reserves began to take over as the minutes slipped by with a sign of a breakthrough.

Those who have come to respect player manager Eoin Hand for his knack of being able to produce a master stroke when most needed, were the only ones who held firm in the belief that Limerick's cause was not to be lost.

Revival

The introduction of Des Kennedy and Ger Duggan for John Delamere and Tony Morris was the first sign of that long promised revival. They gave an entirely new complexion to the game. Harry McCue, who didn't have to exert himself to deprive John Delamere of possession, was suddenly made to look mediocre by Kennedy's ability to win aerial duels, and Duggan's searching runs into the heart of the Athlone defence signalled what was to follow.

It all happened in the 70th minute. Kennedy nodded a long clearance onto the path of Duggan and as the latter worked his way into a scoring position inside the penalty area, he was unceremoniously bundled off the ball by Fenuik.

When Tony Meaney stepped up to take that vital penalty kick he did so in the knowledge that failure could end the hopes of a Limerick dream. "I also knew of the responsibility I had to our supporters," said Meaney, who etched his name into the record books with a beautifully struck shot which sent Mick Smyth the wrong way.

Limerick, scenting that victory was theirs, regrouped their forces to meet the expected late challenge from Athlone Town, and even if the final twenty minutes were the most agonising that we had to suffer all season, they were, in the end, worth it. Many a nail must have been chewed away as the champions elected to continue their attacking policy. There was always the fear that one slip in defence could undo all the good work, but so confident were Limerick at that stage that despite the anxiety which had to be endured, one felt that they could only finish in a blaze of glory.

It took grit, determination, courage and character to secure the point that was needed. Athlone really put it up to them and the big match atmosphere helped to spur them on all the more. Front runners, Devlin, Davis and O'Connor playing a relaxed type of game, kept Storan, O'Mahony, Ryan and Nolan under constant pressure as they went out in quest of an early killer blow.

Walsh came in for extra close marking and unable to make his usual contribution in midfield, some of the sting was taken from the Limerick attack. In addition, Steve Fenuik was making life difficult for Gary Hulmes on the left.

But once they had rid themselves of their early bout of nerves, Limerick strung their game together better and realising that Athlone did have their weak points, began to exploit them. Ryan and Nolan became more adventurous at full back; Storan and O'Mahony formed a solid barrier at the back and with Walsh's fitness a telling factor against Padraig O'Connor, much more was seen of United.

Crafty Campaigner

Eoin Hand was the general in mid-field, and he had an able lieutenant in that crafty campaigner, Tony Meaney. When Limerick seemed to be dropping in tempo after having gained the initiative, it was this duo who sparked them to life again.

The overall standard of play may not have satisfied the football connoisseurs, but boy, there was enough drama, excitement and tension to do justice to a dozen matches. Each side had their moments of supremacy but since Athlone had little to lose but honour, it was Limerick's 4,000 fans who had to do all the sweating.

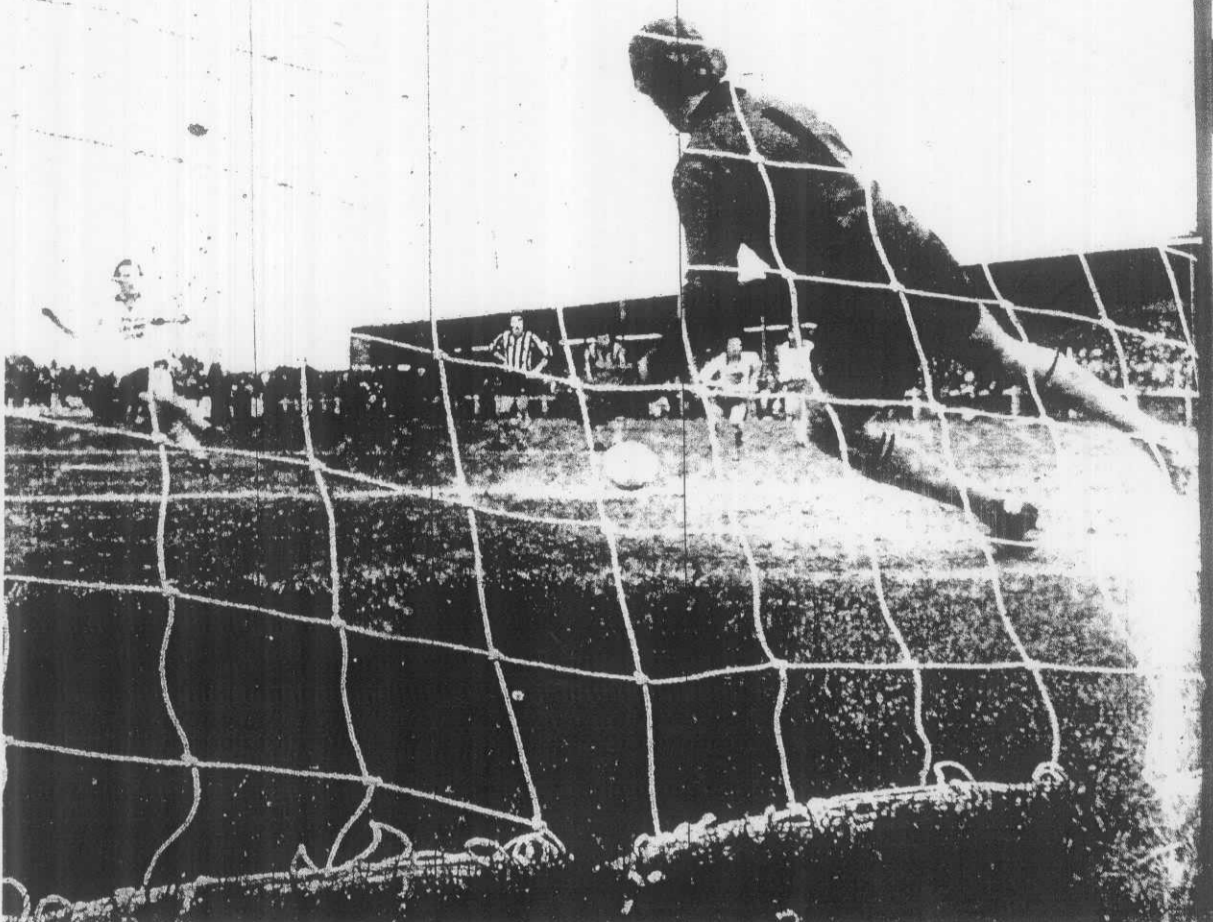
Even had the new champions not achieved their target yesterday, their fans would have been proud of them. Lesser teams would have capitulated under such pressure, but not Limerick, whose dedication and spirit saw to it that they were not to be deprived of the honour which they have fought so well all season to attain.

Athlone followers also admired those fighting qualities for which the Munster side have become famous, and even though they had the satisfaction of seeing their side in the driving seat for 35 minutes, it was obvious from their muted response that for once their affections were for their opponents.

The Play

One could have cut the tension on the field with a knife. Limerick might have been able to become more relaxed had John Delamere timed his run to meet Gary Hulmes second minute cross from the left. The action turned to the other end almost immediately as Fitzpatrick averted an awkward situation by getting his boot in the way of a Davis shot. Johnny Walsh made an exciting spurt along the right wing and won for Limerick their first corner.

Athlone, dangerous on the break, were almost caught napping again when Hand floated across a beautiful centre to Morris, but he deliberated and the chance was lost. It wasn't until the 20th minute that Smyth was seriously tested, getting down to a Hulmes sizzler. Meaney's curving shot hit the butt of a post before going wide, while at the other end Padraig O'Connor got the Limerick defence into a bit of a tangle with a through



Tony Meaney scores from the spot, and Limerick draw level with Athlone. Mick Smyth was sent the wrong way by Meaney's expertly taken kick.

ball to Eugene Davis which the latter failed to make any use of.

Disaster struck the visitors in the 36th minute. John Delamere played the ball back to Ryan from an attacking position. The full back, however, was unable to get to it and an Athlone player intercepted to send a long ball downfield. Fitzpatrick and Nolan misunderstood each other's intentions and with danger looming, the 'keeper was forced to dive on the ball outside his area. A wall was formed, but somehow Michael O'Connor managed to find a path past a stranded Fitzpatrick from the free.

Relentless

Was this lapse of concentration about to cost

Limerick the title? The answer was given in the second half. Dominating play from the outset, United relentless pressure had Athlone defending desperately. The introduction of Kennedy for Delamere in the 52nd minute gave new life to their front line and even if the former missed a glorious opportunity from another Hulmes centre in the 55th minute, he more than compensated afterwards.

Nolan and Morris combined to set up Hulmes and he shot narrowly wide. Then came the incident that was to change Limerick's fortune. Duggan, who had come into the action only eight minutes earlier, ran on to Kennedy's onward flick, only to be taken down in the penalty area. The rest is history.

GREAT SOCCER RECEPTION FOR HEROES

League champions Limerick United were given a tumultuous reception on the outskirts of the city last evening as they made their way to Tony's Restaurant in Shannon Street for a quiet celebration.

Tony Meaney, penalty kick hero, was the player most people wanted to shake hands with. "It was my boot that did all the work," joked the midfielder, who told me that the whole season went through his mind as he prepared to take that 70th minute spot-kick.

"If I had failed, I just couldn't have returned to Limerick," added Meaney, whose vital kick was responsible for bringing the championship to Shannonside.

Goalkeeper Kevin Fitzpatrick wasn't prepared to release his grip on the trophy. "I've waited 20 years for this moment," commented the 36-year-old father of five children, who emphatically denied that he was now contemplating retirement.

Kevin suggested that this latest success was about to give him a new lease of life and that it was his ambition to retain the trophy in 1980-81.

One of the happiest men at the reception was chairman Michael Webb, who proudly declared that 110 years had been taken off his life. Acknowledging that it was made to sweat it out, Webb looks upon this victory as just a launching pad for even greater things to come.

"I can't promise the European Cup—but next year it is going to be the double for us on the domestic scene," said the man who helped to rescue Limerick football some seven years ago. The League win, he continued, gave him tremendous satisfaction—if only for the fact that it silenced all those people who theorised last summer that Limerick might not have a team in 1979-80.

Eoin Hand confessed that he was a very relieved man. "We have had our share of knockers all season, but I knew all the time that we were capable of doing it." He congratulated his players on their response over the past nine months—"and would you believe this is my first honour in football?" said the man who has breathed new life into the game in this region.

Johnny Walsh, off to Argentina next week with Pat Nolan, Gary Hulmes and Brendan Storan, paid tribute to Hand and Dave Mahedy, and had a special word of thanks for their supporters, whom he described as the 'best in the land.'

Joe O'Mahony agreed it was the proudest moment of his life. Des Kennedy thanked Pope John Paul II for their success: "Since the Pope came to Limerick last October everything would seem to have gone right for sport—and particularly for us."

Sitting quietly in the corner was masseur Willie O'Flaherty, who has been associated with the club since 1948. He recalled other great Limerick teams—"but for me this one is the greatest."

Dave Mahedy, a young man who must take a lion's share of the credit for United's spectacular run this season, expressed himself as being over the moon.

Full-back Pat Nolan described the final six minutes as the longest he had ever to endure. Rising young star Brendan Storan agreed. Gary Hulmes told me he got greater satisfaction winning the League medal with Limerick than he did with Sligo Rovers three years ago.

To the strains of "Champions, Champions" Limerick continued to take the game to their opponents but there were a couple of scary moments, as when Fitzpatrick, a real hero on the day, tipped a bound corner kick from Larkin over the crossbar again when he got in the way of McCue's pass.

Limerick United: Fitzpatrick; Nolan, O'Mahony, Storan, Meaney, Hand, Morris, Devlin, Walsh, Hulmes. Subs.: Kennedy for Delamere; Ryan for Morris.

Athlone Town: Smyth; Fenuik, Conway, O'Connell, McMurphy, O'Connor (P.), Wyse, Clarke, Devlin. Sub.: Larkin for Wyse. Referee: Mr. P. Mulhall (Dublin).



Johnny Walsh takes on two Athlone defenders at St. Mel's Park.

The "Limerick Leader" will be publishing a book in the near future to mark Limerick United's victory in the League of Ireland soccer championship. Any companies or firms requiring advertising space should contact Mairead at 45233 without delay.

Each Limerick match will be dealt with in detail and the best of the "Leader" photographers' pictures will help to make this a collector's item.

Joe O'Mahoney and Eoin Hand proudly hold the League Championship trophy after the presentation by president, Donal O'Halloran, on right.