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Soccer team brought honour to Limerick

By JOHN O'SHAUGHNESSY

IF EVER a history of Limerick United Football Club is written, then one name must dominate - it is that of Eoin Hand's, who in the short space of nine months at the helm, brought a new respect to the club.

Sunday, April 20, 1980, was the date that Eoin Hand and his ten white shirted colleagues brought honour and glory to the Treaty City. That was the day on which they went to Athlone in search of the point which would give them the League championship for only the second time in their 42 year history.

United achieved their objective - and the whole of Ireland, Dundalk excepted, rejoiced. The scenes of jubilation at the final whistle were unforgettable.

Limerick's contribution to the game of soccer under Hand's guidance has been well documented. They gave a new image to the code and wherever they went, the crowds rolled in to see them in action. Their attractive brand of football won them fans all over the country, and such was their popularity that many mourned their defeat by Waterford in the semi-final of the FAI Cup at Milltown.

They set a blistering pace from the beginning of the season and only once in seven long months were headed at the top of the table. There were times early on in the campaign when their talents were questioned, and even super optimists had doubts about their staying the pace.

Not only did Limerick keep on winning, but

they improved with each performance. They set up a new points tally, had the best home and away record of any club in the country and attracted the biggest gate returns.

Their discipline was often commented upon. Not once during the season was any of their players shown the red card and it was quite an achievement to go through their 30 match League programme without conceding a penalty.

Such statistics make for impressive reading.

It is also important to note that their success was achieved with practically an all local panel. The only "outsiders" were Eoin Hand, Johnny Matthews, John Delamere and Gary Hulmes, the latter two joining the club late in the season.

Kevin Fitzpatrick was the "daddy" of the side with 20 years in the League of Ireland behind him. Captain Joe O'Mahony was collecting his first League winners medal after 14 years in the top flight, as was Tony Meaney. The remainder were all on the right side of twenty, men like Des Kennedy, John Walsh, Pat Nolan, Jimmy Collins, Ger Duggan, Michael Ryan, Fergus McDonald, Mick McDonnell, Brendan Storan and Tony Morris, all of whom learned their early football in



Joe O'Mahony displays the League of Ireland trophy at St. Mels Park.

the Limerick Schoolboy Leagues.

While those on the pitch shared in most of the glory, mention must be made of the backroom staff, including Willie O'Flaherty and Dave Mahedy, as well as the voluntary workers who gave up so much of their valuable time to look after the day to day running of the club. That League championship success would not have been possible were it not for chairman, Michael Webb, who poured money into the club at a time when few wanted to even hear mention of Limerick AFC.

But Limerick United's success story did not end on that never to be forgotten day at St. Mel's Park, when the local club took in record 'gate' receipts of £6,500.

The new season has seen Limerick take up from where they left off. At the time of writing they were still very much to the fore and completed the first half of their League programme as they started it - on top of the table.

Their amazing run of success has seen a revival of interest at all other levels and it is customary to see big attendances at school-

Limerick United can feel rightly proud of their record over the past 12 months. They showed other clubs that with the proper approach success could be attained. Instead of rushing into the transfer market to build a successful side, they concentrated on grooming their own talent. The spirit and comradeship built up under Hand's reign was second to none, and their professionalism was admired by even their closest challengers.

For all too long Limerick had been the poor relations of Irish soccer.

They had encountered troubled waters for most of their 42 year history, during which time they could reflect on few triumphs. They had to wait 25 years for their first major victory - the Shield, followed by their initial League win in 1959-'60 and the FAI Cup in 1971.

Now that they have achieved consistency in their play, fans are hopeful that they will not have to wait too long for more celebration parties. Could well be that 1981 will see them add to their list of honours.

Eoin Hand has left an indelible mark on

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