

# Sporting Life

with Bernard O'Neill

## An old Hand at Limerick football

**C**AST in bronze atop a limestone plinth in the grounds of St John's Cathedral, Patrick Sarsfield appears destined to spend eternity looking in the direction of Thomond Park.

But, back in the early 1980s, the 1st Earl of Lucan might have been thinking he was facing the wrong way, that all the action, courtesy of Eoin Hand's Limerick United, was happening over his shoulder in the Markets Fields.

Hand returned to the ground where he'll always be welcome earlier this month trailing clouds of past glories.

The Dubliner, a former Limerick United player/manager, was back at the Markets Field to promote his new book: *First Hand - My Life and Irish Football*.

He'd previously noticed the changes to the venue since he led the Blues to the League of Ireland title in 1980. The team are back in the Premier Division, a positive air of optimism, despite flirting with relegation last term, prevails, the playing surface and facilities are amongst the best in the league and the greyhound track that once surrounded the pitch is gone, the furry bingo folk having moved elsewhere in town.

The hecklers are also well departed. They would hold court on the popular side of the ground back in the day and spend the entire 90 minutes questioning, to put it diplomatically, whether officials should book appointments with the 1980s equivalent of Specsavers and the commitment and technique of some Limerick players.

"Take him off and put on no one," was a regular shout. "You're crossing the heart sideways on us," or, to some of our unfortunate wingers: "You couldn't cross the road!"

United were aware of the infamous hecklers: "We remember them, oh yes. We had a nickname for them, can't remember it now," laughed Hand who believes the nickname might have been likening the opinionated pair to the hecklers on the balcony in the Muppet Show.

Hand steered Limerick to the title back in an era when the European Cup was - stand back - exclusively reserved for sides who actually won their Leagues, as opposed to the current "Champions" League featuring a lot of teams who have won FA. The prize was Real Madrid in the first round of the 1980/81 European Cup.

Limerick lost 2-1 to Madrid at Lansdowne Road and 5-1 to the Galácticos in Spain. Des Kennedy scored both our goals. The La Liga giants reached the final that year and lost 1-0 to Liverpool, with another Kennedy, Alan, supplying the winning goal.

That goal was a redeeming strike for the Anfield man, who once, after enduring a nightmare first half for the Merseysiders, overheard Liverpool boss Bob Paisley observing that Lee Harvey Oswald shot the wrong Kennedy!

Meantime, Madrid only conceded four



Eoin Hand with Frank Stapleton

goals in that year's campaign; two to Limerick, one to Liverpool and one to Inter Milan, with Graziano Bini netting in the last-four.

Shortly after the European escapades, whilst simultaneously managing Limerick, Hand accepted the position as manager of the Republic of Ireland aged just 34. He was desperately unlucky not to qualify the national team for the 1982 World Cup. That rainy night in Belgium, where Ireland was denied a perfectly legitimate goal by corrupt or incompetent officials, is etched in his memory.

He reveals that his starting pay as Ireland boss was £12,500 a year, rising to £17,500 per annum, a shameful, index-linked, indictment of the FAI. His successor, Jack Charlton, on being informed of Hand's salary, told the FAI bluntly that there was no way he was working for that money.

In the mid-1980s, Hand ended up in Saudi Arabia coaching Al-Taawoun FC. Showing deft cultural footwork, he avoided replying to invitations to attend public executions and beheadings.

Some folk can be quite old fashioned like that, opting to spend down time with their families, watching sports or doing a bit of the gardening, stuff like that. Public executions in the town square, at the top end of the more esoteric recreational activities, went out of vogue in this neck of the woods after Sky Sports failed to agree terms for exclusive live coverage with Henry VIII!

In 1979, Hand didn't know what to expect when he arrived at the Markets Field to take the position as player/manager, but struck up an immediate partnership with Dave Mahedy.

"Before I took the post, Dave Mahedy had been caretaker manager. I was impressed with what he had to say. I decided it was right that he should be my assistant. I trusted Dave and wanted him to look after the players' fitness training. That was his speciality and so it would prove.

"We went unbeaten in our first eight games. We confidently beat the defending champions, Dundalk, 2-0 in Limerick. I looked around and for the first time

thought. "Something special is happening here." I could feel it."

United would go on to win the league and draw Real Madrid in the European Cup. "My advice to the players was to show no fear [versus the Spaniards in Dublin]."

"We were the champions of Ireland and had earned the right to test ourselves against the best. As the first half progressed, any fears that I may have had vanished. We were playing superbly and it would become increasingly difficult to tell who were the part-timers from Ireland and who were the aristocrats from Madrid."

Hand, in his book, diplomatically writes that the decision to take the Madrid match to Dublin, still a sore point to this day, "backfired", but expanded on that view to Limerick Life.

"It was a shame, that having got the fantastic draw and after the season that we'd had. There was a very wrong decision to take it to Dublin. I was against it at the time. It wasn't fair on the Limerick

public. They'd spend a lot of money following us throughout that season we won the league. It should have been played in Thomond [Park]," he said.

Hand's book recounts catching some Limerick players having a sly pint in Donegal before a match and fining them, standing in Real Madrid's ground admiring the silverware because they thought they were in the trophy room, when, in fact, they were in the Bernabéu reception area, and the personnel battles he has fought in his life.

He's also convinced that it was a glass of beer that he poured over Eamon Dunphy's head - Dunphy had been harshly criticising Hand in the media - and not a glass of wine in a Dublin nightclub.

"As far as I can recollect it was a wine bar but I brought in a bottle of beer..." explained Hand, who scored 24 goals for Limerick United in 76 appearances.

Republic of Ireland manager, the last man to lead the Blues to the title, rattling Real Madrid to the soles of their aristocratic boots, christening the Dunph with beer. What a man.