

# Down Memory Lane: Limerick Utd's 1980 title winning draw



Action from the 1980 League Championship draw



Fans on O'Connell St march to the homecoming under the banner of 'The Champs'

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AT PRECISELY 5.15 on Sunday April 20, 1980 there was an invasion of the blue and white brigade onto the pitch at St Mel's Park, the home of Athlone town.

The invasion told its tale - 20 years after their initial success in the League of Ireland Championship, Limerick were being hailed by their supporters as League Champions, after a grueling and, at times, nerve-sapping campaign, which culminated in their taking that vital point from Athlone Town after a 1-1 draw, to send them above former champions Dundalk at the top of the table.

And, as with many games throughout the season, the tension and frayed nerves were in evidence before, finally, the character that Eoin Hand had instilled in his team won through with Limerick fighting back gallantly to gain a merited draw.

Believe me, this game was a fitting finale to the season as Athlone Town,

notwithstanding the fact that their interest in the destination of the league title was purely academic, made Limerick fight tooth and nail for the elusive point.

It was a fitting tribute that Eoin Hand, who directed Limerick to their first league title in 20 years, was able to launch an impressive managerial career which saw him manage the Irish senior team, while also later bringing Limerick to face Real Madrid in the European Cup.

## Match Report

Getting back to the famous match in Athlone. With Johnny Fullam, looking as if he could play until his 60th birthday, and Harry McCue so dominant in the early stages, it was not surprising that Turlough O'Connor's men created the better initial chances.

After just five minutes of play, McCue sent Devlin clear into the Limerick area, but Kevin Fitzpatrick, brilliantly reacting to the danger was off his line like a shot, to divert the ball away with an

outstretched leg - Pat Nolan sweeping the rebound away from the in-rushing Eugene Davis.

Fitzpatrick's class saved Limerick on that occasion, but those early minutes were still fraught with danger for the 'Blues' as Brendan Storan, untypically, struggled to master Frank Devlin in the air.

On the right Pat Nolan was having his edgy moments also, while Athlone's Michael O'Connor, wearing the No 4 jersey, but playing as an orthodox outside right, was showing all the finesse and skill that one normally associated with his elder brother, Turlough.

A neat flurry from Limerick in the 13th minute, involving Tony Meaney, Walsh and Hand saw the player manager's cross from the right drop just behind the in-rushing Tony Morris.

It was mainly Athlone in the early stages and when Davis sent Devlin striding into the area in the 18th minute, Brendan Storan's timely tackle, at the expense of a corner, was a welcome



More action from the 1-1 draw 40 years ago this month. The crowds in the back ground show the level of interest in the league at the time

sight.

Gradually, however, with Hand doing most of the hard grafting in midfield, a semblance of cohesion crept into the Limerick play.

Well placed by hand, Gary Hulmes troubled Smyth in the 20th minute, with his left-footed shot from the edge of the area.

Limerick had now begun to string their passes together and go at Athlone - but then, disaster struck.

Deep inside the Athlone half, John Delamere saw his intended back-pass to Ryan go astray to Michael O'Connor, who pumped the ball deep into the heart of the Limerick defence; between them, Nolan and Fitzpatrick got their calls wrong on the edge of the area, with the result that the keeper had to handle the ball outside the "box" to prevent Davis getting possession.

From the resultant free kick, Michael O'Connor beat the Limerick wall first, and then Fitzpatrick, with a classic effort.

That 37th minute goal really put it up to Limerick,

but the most they could muster before the interval was a Moss shot which cleared the crossbar, while the little No 8 also saw a close in header saved by Smyth.

Paddy Mulhall's whistle followed shortly afterwards to signal the end of a first half that had seen Limerick in trouble in certain areas.

In the middle Johnny Walsh's influence on proceedings had been more sporadic than sustained. Up front Delamere was in trouble all they way against McCue, who won everything that was going in the air, while Morris had only been seen in patches.

Seven minutes into the second-half, however, came the move that restored some of Limerick's equilibrium when Eoin Hand introduced Des Kennedy as a substitute for Delamere.

Shortly after Kennedy's arrival on the field Tony Meaney sent Hulmes away along the right, but Morris lost control of the centre when it came over.

Now well into their stride, the 61st minute saw Limerick

string a lovely attacking piece together with play sweeping from left to right in a move involving Kennedy, Hand and Nolan - the latter's cross being touched onto Morris to Hulmes, who drove it narrowly wide at the far post.

Going for broke, Hand brought Gerry Duggan into the game, two minutes later, with Tony Morris retiring, in an attempt to prise open, the impregnable Athlone defence.

Limerick succeeded in doing just that, in the 69th minute, with both substitutes playing vital roles in the score.

In typical fashion, Kennedy got up above McCue to a long ball from Fitzpatrick to nod onto Duggan, who hared into the area chased by Fenuik.

As he was about to shoot, Duggan toppled over to the attempted tackle from behind by the Athlone defender - referee, Mulhall having no doubts about the penalty award.

With an aplomb that he could hardly have felt inwardly, Meaney stepped up





The homecoming in Arthur's Quay Park, with Sarsfield House in the background. Mayor Bobby Byrne welcomed the side home



Limerick Utd, sponsored by Limerick Savings Bank, took a massive crowd to the game at St Mel's Park. At the final whistle, the fans could not be contained as they stormed the pitch to celebrate



to the spot kick to push his slow low to his left with Smyth moving in the opposite direction.

Immediately the 'Blue and White brigade' went into raptures as Meaney, a la Ronnie Delaney, sank to his knees in thanksgiving.

With a historic league success now within their grasp, it was inevitable, I suppose that caution should creep into the Limerick play with the result that Athlone dominated the final 15 minutes of the game.

With just three minutes remaining came the final drama of an absorbing contest.

Way out on the right, Padraig O'Connor hoisted a high lob into the Limerick area.

In his attempt to clear Fitzpatrick punched the ball out a few yards to McCue, with every Limerick heart in the crowd missing a beat as the blond haired defender lined up his shot.

Making up for his initial lapse, however, Fitzpatrick superbly parried McCue's effort away from target.

Minutes later, Paddy Mulhall's final whistle acted as the spur to scenes of joyous

celebrations which reportedly ended shortly before Christmas that year.

An unforgettable occasion then, with Limerick proudly taking their second league title - how far away those first faltering steps against U.C.D. back in September 1979 seemed at St Mel's Park.

And if the younger players had such an important role in this success, few will quibble with me, I believe, if I single out Kevin Fitzpatrick and Joe O'Mahoney for special mention.

In the good - and not so good - days, this pair have been outstanding servants not just of local football, but of Irish football.

Also their overdue success in the league was greeted with acclaim through the length and breadth of the country.

For more pictures from the game and the homecoming see [www.limerickleader.ie](http://www.limerickleader.ie)

**These pictures are from the Limerick Leader archive. If you can help with identification of people at the game email [sport@limerickleader.ie](mailto:sport@limerickleader.ie)**