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University College Dublin Football Club, or more commonly known as UCD AFC, dispelled the myth that 'you can't win anything with kids' 11 years before Alan Hansen uttered that famous line. In 1984 they became the first university club in Europe to reach a senior domestic cup final, win it and then proceed to compete in a European competition. The club was founded in 1895 under the name of Catholic University Medical School Cecilia Street Football Club, and in one of their first matches they beat Trinity College Dublin 2-0 who are still to the present day fierce rivals of UCD. During this period as Catholic University, the club would play a vital role in the formation of the Leinster Junior League (now Leinster Senior League) in 1896 which enabled the club to compete in non-intervarsity competition.

They became the club that we know today in 1908 when the Catholic University was annexed by UCD and as a consequence of the merger, the Catholic University team was renamed UCD AFC. Subsequently UCD would go on to become the most successful university team in Ireland by winning the Collingwood Cup, Ireland's most prestigious intervarsity competition, a remarkable 34 times. To put that into perspective the second most successful team in the competition, Queen's University Belfast AFC, have won the Collingwood Cup 13 times. UCD also won a litany of other cups including the Leinster Senior Cup, Harding Cup and the FAI Intermediate Cup prior to the cup triumph of 1984, further highlighting their footballing pedigree.

'The Doc' Becomes Manager

UCD's journey towards winning the FAI Cup began in 1970 when the club was elected to play in the League of Ireland B. This was a major step for UCD as it meant they were just one level away from competing in senior football – an unprecedented feat for a university football team. It was also around this time that the most important and influential figure in the history of UCD joined the club in a general manager type capacity, Dr. Tony O'Neill or as he was affectionately known in Irish football circles, The Doc. While I was speaking to the cup winning UCD goalkeeper Alan O'Neill, he said that '90% of that cup win [FAI Cup] was down to The Doc. He was UCD through and through'. I also spoke to UCD's talismanic striker at the time, Joe Hanrahan, and he regarded Dr. Tony O'Neill as an Arsene Wenger type of individual who had a transformative impact on UCD. This could not be a more fitting testament to the man behind the scenes who put all the pieces in place for UCD to be successful. It was in July 1979 that UCD finally began competing in senior domestic football when they gained entry to the League of Ireland.

Perhaps the most significant strategy that The Doc put in place for the club was the scholarship scheme that allowed talented, young footballers to come into UCD and obtain a university education while playing football at the highest level in Ireland. The UCD scholarship scheme was introduced in 1979 with Keith Dignam being the first recipient and he would go on to play in midfield against Shamrock Rovers in the 1984 FAI Cup final. Since then the club has been a regular training ground for promising Irish talent.

The step up to League of Ireland football was a difficult one initially for UCD's team of students. During their first four seasons playing at the highest level in Ireland they finished no higher than 12th place in a 16 team league. This led The Doc to make the decision that would propel the club towards winning the FAI Cup. UCD would look to break their policy of being a student-only team and bring outsiders into the club by signing experienced professionals. Former Ireland international defender Paddy Dunning was signed from Dundalk where he had won numerous league and cup titles and played in their 1979/80 European Cup run where, they ultimately lost 3-2 on aggregate against Celtic. In addition to Dunning, goalkeeper Alan O'Neill signed from Shamrock Rovers along with Robbie Gaffney. Robbie Lawlor signed from Dundalk with Frank Devlin coming to UCD from Drogheda United. The experience of these players blended fantastically with the raw talent of the players coming through from the scholarship scheme. Players such as Ken O'Doherty in defence, Keith Dignam and Aidan Reynolds in midfield with Joe Hanrahan up front.

The Cup Run

While speaking to Alan O'Neill and Joe Hanrahan, both players said that going into the 1983/84 season there was an aspiration within the team that it would be a successful year for the club. By this point the students were beginning to mature as players and with the addition of the experienced professionals coming in, it added some steel and a strong spine to the team. With UCD riding high in the league, they began their FAI Cup campaign in the 5th round of the competition (senior teams entered at this stage) against defending champions Sligo Rovers. With the Students losing 3-1 after 55 minutes they produced an impressive comeback to draw the game, after two corners from Joe Hanrahan were converted by Ken O'Doherty and Robbie Lawlor, and force a replay against Sligo Rovers. Keith Dignam also scored UCD's first goal of that game with a scorcher from 25 yards out. In the replay, Sligo Rovers were annihilated in their own stadium against the irresistible UCD who came out 5-0 victors, with Joe Hanrahan scoring twice.

Winning the FAI Cup

The Students won their quarter final match against Home Farm after Robbie Gaffney's cross was deflected into the net by a Home Farm defender. The strength of the UCD defense would become a recurring theme in their cup challenge. In the semi-final the Students were drawn against Waterford United who had won the FAI Cup as recently as 1980. The semi-final clash with Waterford was a tight and nervy game, as to be expected, with a Joe Hanrahan goal from 25 yards winning it. In the final UCD would face Shamrock Rovers who had just secured their first league title in twenty years and were considered by many to be the best team to ever play in the League of Ireland.

The final in Dalymount Park itself was a poor game devoid of many chances at either end. The lack of opportunity for Rovers was down to UCD's heroic and resolute defence which stifled the expansive Shamrock Rovers. The match ended 0-0 with it going to a replay in Tolka Park the following Friday. The replay was much more exciting and provided a thrilling climax to UCD's tremendous cup run. Alan O'Neill was in great form yet again, which provided the platform for striker Joe Hanrahan to open the scoring in the 40th minute with a sumptuous left-footed finish under Shamrock Rovers keeper Jody Byrne, after he got his angles wrong. Ken O'Doherty then missed a penalty to double UCD's advantage before Shamrock Rovers equalised from a penalty of their own just before the hour mark. It was in the sixth minute of injury time that Ken O'Doherty prodded home the winner from Keith Dignam's free kick to win the FAI Cup for UCD and seal their place in the European Cup Winners' Cup the next season.

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European Adventure: UCD versus Everton

The reward for UCD on their maiden voyage into Europe would be a tie against star studded FA Cup winners Everton. This would be a David vs Goliath tie in the truest sense of the word, with Everton fielding players of the calibre of Neville Southall, Peter Reid, Kevin Sheedy, Andy Gray and Graeme Sharp. The Students would adopt the same approach against Everton that had won them the cup against Shamrock Rovers, which meant that UCD would rely on the dogged determination of their defence. The first leg was played in Tolka Park, where UCD had won the cup, and the pitch certainly aided their cause in stifling Everton due to the fact that it was an extremely tight pitch. The Students were able to hold Everton to a goalless draw meaning they would only need a score draw over in Goodison Park to knock Everton out and progress to the next round. But Everton would win the tie in their back yard, and the club would go to the win the Cup, and the old English first division.

Legacy of the Cup Team

After the 1984/85 season Ken O'Doherty was signed by Crystal Palace and Joe Hanrahan, who was Young Player of the Year in the cup winning season, was snapped up by Manchester United and went on to have a successful career when he returned to the League of Ireland, winning cup medals with Derry City and the league with Dundalk in 1995. Tragically, Dr. Tony O'Neill (the Doc) passed away in 1999 after a short illness at just 53 years of age. Perhaps his most enduring legacy, and also that of the 1984 cup winning team, is the UCD scholarship scheme and the opportunities that it offers young players early in their careers.

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Speaking to the Tribune, Joe Hanrahan said that 'other clubs have recognised that UCD is a

fantastic nursery for allowing players to educate themselves and develop themselves as footballers'. The prime example of this can be seen with the core of four players who began their careers with UCD, who now make up the Dundalk team that has won 3 league titles in a row and gone on a fantastic European run. The latest player to depart from UCD for England was midfielder Dylan Watts, who left to sign for Premier League champions Leicester City in August 2016, proving that UCD's scholarship scheme is still producing top quality talent for the future.