

UCD – Football and Study: by Brian King



My connection with UCD goes back to 1997/1998. Among the team of Jason Sherlock, Tony Mc Donnell, Robbie Mc Auley and co I was thrown. That team, for ‘the college’ enthusiasts who remember, included Ken Kilmurray, Ciarán Kavanagh, Mick O’Byrne, Robbie Dunne, Mick O’Donnell, Eoin Bennis, John Martin, Séamus Kelly, Wayne Fitzgerald, Clive Delaney, Ciarán Martyn. As well as being with the players, I remember the presence of Dr. Tony O’Neill, Theo Dunne, Alan O’Neill and kit man Larry Quinn.

I would have been 11 and 12 at this time and it was with huge excitement I would be brought by my father Noel to the training sessions and to almost all of the match days. I had special access as a 12 year old, eager to collect the footballs, get the water for the lads and just delighted to be around, practicing free kicks on the hallowed Belfield Park pitch before and after games.

That period was special for me, the group treated me extremely well, I remember been given a pair of Dublin GAA shorts by Jason Sherlock on one occasion travelling on the team bus to an away game. I remember the long trip to Turner's Cross which resulted in a 2-1 win. I also remember a miserable day losing 5-1 in Belfield. I remember the talent of the players, Ken Kilmurray's strength, skill and ability, Ciáran Martyn's midfield presence, runs and knack of scoring, Mick O'Byrne threat, formidable Séamus Kelly in goal and Clive Delaney in defence. Robbie McAuley and Mick O'Donnel's left feet, Eoin Bennis' speed, John Martyn's dribbling and attacking. It was an exciting team, even thinking now after playing some years myself, that team had really great talent. I think Ken Kilmurray, Eoin Bennis and obviously Jason went on to be strong GAA performers. It was with great excitement and feeling of involvement that I was usually watching these lads play from the privileged position on the team bench, at the age of 12.

As is the nature of League of Ireland football, it is common for high seasonal changes of players and of your club so this was a precious experience at Belfield which gave massive importance to me when I returned to play for UCD at the age of 18.

From Belfield in 1998 my journey obviously co-related with Noel's which gave me similar precious experiences at Finn Harps, at Shelbourne and for some years with Ireland's womens team all packed with superb memories and times.

So it was with great preparation when I began a competitive career myself. My schoolboy days were with Stella Maris, playing alongside Joe O'Brien (now West Ham United), Shaun Williams (now Milwall), Patrick Cregg (now Shamrock Rovers), David Elebert (ex Hamilton Academical, now Glenavon) and many other players who had superb talent and subsequently found other opportunities ahead of pursuing a football career. Our league contained Stephen Quinn (now Hull City), Gary Dicker (now Carlisle United), Paul Mc Shane (now Hull City), Andy Keogh (now Perth Glory) and again many other talented players so it was a competitive schoolboy experience and packed with excellent memories.

There were a few trips to English clubs, Leeds United (with Stephen Quinn and Shane Mc Faul -now KTP Finland), Manchester City (with Patrick Cregg) and Blackburn Rovers (with Gavin Peers -now Sligo Rovers and Eddie Nolan- now Scunthorpe) but after Stella Maris my trajectory took me to Shelbourne, with the Under 21 team and also among the first team squad training regularly with the full time group which contained Wes Hoolahan, Glen Crowe, Alan Moore, Ollie Cahill, Alan Cawley, Joseph Ndo, Richie and Dessie Baker, Jason Byrne and many others who

were at the time by far the strongest group of players in the league, that competed against Deportivo La Coruña and Steaua Bucharest in the Champions League all of which was an exciting time to be involved with the club.

Like anyone who has played football, it is with great interest and pride to see people you played with at any time, shared dressing rooms and time together, develop their careers, following and aware of all, in the case of many Irish players, developing careers and their lives in other professions and with many stories.

A season loan was arranged for me to play with Kilkenny City at Buckley Park in the First Division along with Gary Deegan (now Southend United) who was also developing at Shelbourne full time at that time.

At 17 and having completed my Leaving Certificate, I entered UCD as an Arts student at the same time my footballing endeavors with Shelbourne and Kilkenny. It was a year of chaotic traveling, serious academic demands, an early morning to late night schedule, part time employment in a Champion Sports store and a League of Ireland season to play. A lifestyle that challenged me but probably with too many different paths, each beginning to rapidly develop on their own.

It was fortunate circumstances that saw me move to play for UCD AFC a year after I had entered the college separately. There was a large number of young guys at the club, there was the 1st team which contained players with more of a footballing career focus, an under 21 team with younger lads some away from their homes and combining study, usually Sports Management, with their football. There were also other teams, a Leinster Senior League team with lads usually studying more diverse subjects and focused on that and other professional areas, it was a mixed group but there was a large number of guys always around the Sports Centre in UCD and it was a interesting place to be.

It was probably this diversity that created other opportunities, other possible career paths and opened other avenues, ahead of a football career mindset that existed more in hardened professional football environments such as Shelbourne at that time and other League of Ireland clubs with lads determined and committed to get a successful professional contract and an opportunity with a bigger club in a more intense league as we know many of which exist in England, namely Conference football, the three football leagues and the current pinnacle of professional football the Premier League.

An Arts degree is at odds perhaps with the intense determination, desperation described and needed pursuing a professional football life and this was a conflict for me. At the beginning I treated my studies with a little disregard, I experienced the perhaps common notion of passing exams as being the ambition, which I did on the most minimal of levels. It was exciting, I loved the big matches we had at UCD, a night match away in The Brandywell to Derry City or a night match away to Shamrock Rovers in Tolka Park, battling, fighting, competing, the atmosphere, were fulfilling nights and full of satisfaction. Concurrently I was enjoying University life. I graduated and completed my degree and I also thrived in the High Performance Unit in UCD which educated all of us at the time about Sports Science with really superb mentors John Barrie, Kyle and Lisa.

My final games with UCD brought me an opportunity to train with Hamilton Academicals and Stockport County for periods after the end of our season. It felt good to have opportunities to try to develop my football career, it would clearly be seen as progress. They were really good experiences in both clubs. Both reflected a similar environment to Shelbourne with lads who professional football was their main commitment. I reunited with David Elebert, James Mc Carthy (now Everton) was at Hamilton at this time, James McArthur (now Crystal Palace) and Alex Neil, now Norwich City's 33 year old high flying manager and Stockport possessed many well established football league players and I was also alongside Gary Dicker and Jim Gannon who was previously at Shelbourne.

At that time I spoke with Alan Matthews who was assembling his team at Drogheda and I decided to join. We had a great year in Drogheda, despite commuting three to four times a week to either United Park or training at the old ghost Mosney facility which is now a temporary home for refugees who have come to Ireland, or a Friday away trip, it was an enjoyable year. The atmosphere in my two years with Alan at Drogheda was always good, the lads were all comfortable with Alan and we were good with each other, however, we did not collect too many points, a relegation/promotion play off was by far the highlight winning 2-0 and I scored the second. The second season was fine, I was 23, I began working a job which had me rising at 3:00am 6 days a week, I loved the job, I knew I wasn't going to commit to a full time football playing job at that time as they were also hard to find, unless you moved away. On the 14th of May 2014, in The Showgrounds away to Sligo Rovers, I got two bookings, sent off for my first time including as a schoolboy we were beaten 6-0, it was my last game, I knew it had been coming for months so it was the perfect clean break, I phoned Alan on Monday and subsequently he also had come to the end of his time at Drogheda later that day also and departed.

For me it was great, I concentrated on the job I was doing for the following months, I took an

amazing trip to Trinidad and Tobago to support Noel's team in the Under 17 Womens World Cup. I traveled onto an old friend in Atlanta Georgia for a few weeks, New York, Kansas City, Lyon, returned and completed a MA in DCU in International Relations, got a TEFL qualification, began teaching, traveled and lived in Madrid for two years, followed Atlético Madrid and Real Madrid in Atlético's amazing league winning year, saw the party in the city and I made the trip to Lisbon for the final. So it has been positive and good and UCD has given me a lot through the University itself and also through my time at UCD AFC both have given me a great base. It was also a great opportunity in October 2014 to travel to Cologne to support Ireland v Germany and see a one time UCD AFC coach Noel as Ireland coach that day supporting and with the same excitement and passion as the Belfield Park days in 1998.

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