

Robin Jones recalls fond memories with UCD AFC.



Robin Jones was part of UCD AFC's Leinster Senior League and Intervarsity squads in the early 2000's. He looks back on his time and brings us through a few memorable moments.

I always regard my time playing with UCD as being filled with luck! With that said, luck wasn't quite on my side in the second trial match when I damaged knee cartilage and couldn't play on. Macker (for some reason!) gave me a chance and I found myself in the Freshers squad for the 2002/2003 season.

I had not played competitive football for four years at that time as I had gone to a predominately rugby playing school and this was a big step-up for me. Our first season in the Leinster Senior League was a learning experience for all of us. While most of our team was made up with 18 year old Irish players, we also had a number of international players. I still wonder what the international player thought of the Irish Sunday league football when they found themselves playing on a bobbly pitch in the driving rain against teams much older than us who, it seemed, had more interest in kicking us than the ball.

While the Leinster Senior League was keeping us busy on a weekly basis, the highlight of the Freshers season has always been The Harding Cup – the university Freshers tournament. The 2003 Harding Cup was held by University College Galway. Each of our first three games were against teams from the North – Coleraine, Jordanstown and Queens. Three victories later and we found ourselves in the final against the hosts. The game was due to be played at Terryland Park but had to be switched to the much less glamorous Dangen Sports Grounds at the last minute due to terrible weather conditions. Our German midfielder, Paddy Zenz, opened the scoring for us before Craig Sergeant got a brace. We looked to be cruising to a comfortable victory at 3-1 going into the final minutes but a penalty save later by our US goalkeeper, James Myer, and a late second goal by the hosts left us relieved at the final whistle. The tournament proved to be a good one for me as I bagged five goals and the “Player of the Tournament” award.

That landed me a place in the Collingwood Cup squad a few weeks later. Again we reached the final with relative ease and again our opponents were the hosts, this time University College Cork. The final was played in the Mardyke grounds and both teams were filled with future League of Ireland stars. Another penalty save by James Myer wasn't enough for us as UCC narrowly won 2-1.

That summer brought more luck, in a stange way – the outbreak of SARS in Canada meant that I had to cancel my summer away to Vancouver. As it happened, the UCD scholarship programme was having a dry patch and a few of us Freshers were called up to the Lol reserve team to make up the numbers. Paul Doolin was the manager at that time and I soon realised that there was only one way under Paul...his way! I was on the end of a particularly harsh Brian Clough-style barage at half time in our first match. Luckily for me and any chance I had of getting game time, Paul Doolin was soon replaced by Pete Mahon. Pete had a completely different managerial style to Paul but he couldn't stop the inevitable relegation after taking over the job 11 points adrift at the bottom of the table.

I was reminded of how far I had come in a year when playing against the Shamrock Rovers reserves and I had the unenviable task of marking Trevor Molloy in centre midfield on his way back from injury in the season when he finished top goalscorer for Rovers. I am not ashamed to say that I was owned by him all night and to make matters worse he scored probably the best goal I've seen in real life – he had the ball outside our box and was looking to distribute the ball but with nothing on it seemed that he simply decided to put the ball in the top corner of our goal! Unfortunately I never got to play in the first team but I am sure it was a better summer than what Vancouver could have offered.

Unfortunately the rest of my time with UCD brought no more silverware in inter-varisty competitions but it was a different story in the Leinster Senior League. By this time the Freshers had changed to playing on Saturdays and the Inters were playing on Sundays. The Inters team at that time had an understanding on the pitch which I have not experienced since - we could pass the ball blind knowing where our team-mates would be. My final year with UCD ended in us being league champions – on the road to which I scored a somewhat unspectacular goal but one of my favourites. I was playing up front that day and Simon Gordan took the ball from our keeper in the left back position. With the understanding that I mentioned already, I knew exactly that Si was going to put the ball between the defense and the keeper. I peeled off the shoulder of my marker and got my head on the ball just before the on-coming keeper who had left his line. The goal won us the game and pretty much ensured us the title.

All-in-all I look back at my time with UCD with great memories and appreciate all the opportunities granted to me. I always claim to having been able to play football before I joined UCD but learned how to play when at UCD!