

Aidan Geraghty looks back on a famous day in **2000**

Waterford clash brings back memories

When Pat Fenlon joined Damien Richardson's star-studded Shelbourne team from struggling Shamrock Rovers in the Summer of 1997, the Reds were on a high.

They had just beaten Derry City to claim a second successive FAI Cup, and were setting off to the sunny shores of Kilmarnock to face the Scottish side in the soon-to-be defunct European Cup Winners' Cup.

Rico had assembled a squad boasting League of Ireland legends such as the Geoghegan brothers, Tony Sheridan, Mark Rutherford and Pat Morley to name just a few. However, the league title had proven elusive since 1992 which we covered in the Dundalk programme on 21st Feb.

Close calls included a three-way playoff which Cork City eventually won in 1993, and a three-way showdown on the last day in 1995. On that day, Dundalk were crowned champions.

A major criticism of Richardson's Shels team was that it was too focused on "pretty football" and needed to add some steel. Enter, central midfielder Pat Fenlon. A former Chelsea academy player, the Finglas man had made a name for himself as a midfield general with St Pat's and Bohemians.

The season that followed, 1997/98, was another campaign that ended in what ifs around Tolka Park. The Reds were beaten by Sligo Rovers in the League Cup Final, by Cork City in the FAI Cup Final, and a last-day defeat in Oriel Park meant St Pats claimed the league title in Kilkenny.

Fenlon remembers his time playing under Richardson fondly.

"I think Dermot (Keely) probably influenced me more when I became a manager but I really enjoyed playing under Damien.

"With him, it was total football as such, he wanted the game played that way, whereas Dermot wanted to mix the game up a bit more."

The elusive league title didn't escape Shels' grasp forever, though. On the 7th of April 2000, "Nutsy" won the third league medal of his career (others with Pats and Linfield) when Richie Baker's goal gave Shelbourne a 1-0 lead against Waterford United, the predecessor to tonight's opponents.

"I think we had a lot of momentum going into that season," said Fenlon, "but the pressure was there going to Waterford."

He added: "The lads had come close a few times before I joined and again up in Dundalk in my first season.

"People expected us to win the league and thankfully we delivered. That was important because it gave us the experience and belief to achieve what we did in the years after that."

By contrast, Waterford United spent time between the Premier and First Divisions following that famous night in the RSC. They did reach the final of the 2004 FAI Cup but were defeated by Longford Town.

The club was replaced by the current incarnation, Waterford FC, in 2017 with significant financial backing from Lee Power.

The Blues got promoted at the first attempt, with former Shels midfielder Alan Reynolds at the helm and Fenlon as Director of Football.

Fenlon admits that it was only after leaving his position in Waterford that he began to reflect on his time as a player.



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**SHELS AHEAD OF 1920 SEASON,
WITH VAL HARRIS AS CAPTAIN**

“After that, I managed for 14 years straight so I never had time to think about my playing career.

“I obviously went down to Waterford and gave Alan (Reynolds) a dig out so when I finished down there I started to miss playing.”

When discussing his expectations for both the Reds and our visitors from the Southeast, Pat believes Premier Division survival should be the primary aim of both clubs.

“In Waterford’s case, Alan has done a great job to get promoted and get them into Europe. Obviously they weren’t allowed to play in Europe and the impact that had on the club has been well-documented.

“They had a hard off-season as a result of that and only got a squad together late on, so I think for them to stay in the league would be a decent achievement.”

The former Reds player and manager has similar expectations of the club with which he played 153 games won five league titles.

“I think what Shels need is stability. That means staying in the league for a few years. It’s easy to get carried away and say, because of the size of the club, that they should be winning leagues or qualifying for Europe.

“But the important thing for the next two to three years is to build momentum. I think they’ve done that so far both on and off the pitch.

“Ian (Morris) has done a fantastic job and the crowds so far have been great, as you’d expect with such a big club.

“The players themselves will have

bigger ambitions. They’ll see how Bohs got to Europe last season and say ‘we can do that’, but from a planning point of view, especially for Shels, I think this needs to be built slowly and steadily.”

Having mentioned Ian Morris already, the seven-time league winning manager is impressed with the Reds gaffer’s progress to date.

“I like him so far. I don’t hear much about him which tells me he’s just going about his job.

“In terms of the four Dublin clubs, I think Ian was under the most pressure last year. Rovers were expected to be a bit off Dundalk, Bohs and Pats wouldn’t have had too much pressure either.

“Ian had to deal with the weight of expectancy to get promoted and win the First Division, and he handled that well.

“He’s set his teams up positively. People might have expected Shels to come into games and sit tight but they haven’t. They got after Dundalk and they got after Pats.

Since leaving Waterford in 2018, Pat had a spell as Director of Football with Linfield. He can be heard commenting on RTE and Eir Sport’s coverage of the League of Ireland, including our Dublin Derby last week in Dalymount.