



Philip O'Rourke

**FORGOTTEN**  
**FOOTBALL**  
**CLUBS**

Fifty Teams Across the World,  
Gone but Never Forgotten



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1.

## Sporting Fingal FC (Republic of Ireland)

SPORTING FINGAL FC were founded in 2007, a project that was funded partly by the Fingal County Council and property developer Gerry Gannon. The idea was to bring League of Ireland football to the area of Fingal, which had no football club to represent it, despite being the third most populated area in Ireland. The club's colours were black and green, with the away strip white and green. They were granted permission to play at Morton Stadium, a venue that had been used previously by current League of Ireland club Shamrock Rovers and former League of Ireland club and now defunct, Dublin City. Liam Buckley was appointed manager and director of football.

The proposed plan was to create a community club and to use the schoolboy teams in the area to produce talent, giving the players a pathway to play League of Ireland football. The club were not expected to play in the League of Ireland in their first year and had applied to play in the A Championship, a league just below the First Division, with mostly amateur clubs competing in it. However, Kilkenny City folded and became another casualty of Irish football, and they vacated the space for Sporting Fingal FC to fill in the First Division.

And so, the club prepared for their debut season, signing players such as former Bohemians and St Patrick's Athletic

striker, Robbie Doyle, Peter Hynes and local former Universit College Dubline (UCD) player Conan Byrne.

Not much was expected of the new club and their League of Ireland debut came at Flancare Park, the home of Longford Town, who had just been relegated the previous season. Only nine Sporting Fingal fans had travelled to the game (I know this because I was one of them) and they witnessed their side take a surprising lead when Hynes's 35-yard shot lobbed the goalkeeper. (It still remains one of the best goals I have seen at a live game.) But that would be all the nine fans would be cheering about, as Longford Town justified their tag as favourites and ran out 5-1 winners.

That wasn't to be the way things went for the rest of the season, as Sporting Fingal ended up finishing fourth out of the ten clubs. They had Doyle's goals to thank for their success as he finished up as the league's top marksman on 16 goals that season. Dundalk were promoted as champions, one point clear of Sporting Fingal's local rivals Shelbourne, a rivalry that most Shelbourne fans dismissed, stating that Sporting Fingal were nothing more than a franchise, even nicknaming them 'Sporting Franchise'. Sporting got the better of Shelbourne that season, winning one (2-1 at home) and drawing the other three games (1-1, 1-1 and 0-0).

It was during the second season that Sporting Fingal put their name in the history books of Irish football. Once again, expectations had been realistic and a play-off spot was the target, even with the challenge being made a little harder with the expansion of the First Division from ten clubs to 12. It was a four-horse race as to who would win the First Division title and automatic promotion. There was no surprise that UCD, who had been relegated the season before, were the favourites, along with Shelbourne who had been flirting with promotion back to the highest level for a few seasons. Waterford United were the other contenders,

alongside Sporting Fingal. The Students of UCD pipped Shelbourne to the title by just one point, with Sporting Fingal beating Waterford to third spot, ensuring that they would get the chance to gain promotion via the play-offs.

The first game was a one-off fixture against local rivals Shelbourne, at Tolka Park, Shelbourne's home ground. They were given home advantage as they had finished second that season. The game itself drew in an attendance of 1,632 and was played on 10 November 2009. Sporting Fingal took a 2-0 advantage into the half-time break with goals from Libyan international Eamon Zayed (39th minute) and Shaun Williams (41st minute), a player who has gone on to play for MK Dons, Millwall and Portsmouth, as well as earning three caps for the Republic of Ireland national team. Shelbourne hit back in the second half and pulled one back from the penalty spot. Shelbourne's top goalscorer that season, McAllister converted the spot kick in the 72nd minute. It should have given Shelbourne the momentum, but Anto Flood saw red in the 73rd minute to make their task of equalising that little bit harder. Fingal held on to beat their rivals and book their place in the promotion/relegation decider against the side who finished bottom of the Premier Division that season. That side was Bray Wanderers.

The final was made into a two-legged affair, with Sporting Fingal getting home advantage in the first leg. On 13 November the First Division side won the match 2-0 in front of a crowd of 740 at Morton Stadium. Goals from Stephen Paisley (51st minute) and Conan Byrne (67th minute) ensured they had a healthy advantage going into the second leg at the Carlisle Ground in Bray three days later. This time Fingal took the lead in the second half, when Zayed scored in the 59th minute. With Fingal 3-0 up on aggregate, the contest looked to be all but over, but Bray

came back fighting and Flood scored in the 83rd minute to give the Seagulls a glimmer of hope. Sporting Fingal's defence held out, and it looked to be a matter of time before the final whistle would be blown and they would be confirmed as a Premier Division side for the 2010 season.

Bray, however, kept going and in the 91st minute, Chris O' Connor scored to put them in front on the night and make it 3-2 on aggregate. But in their desperation to get that third goal, Bray were left open at the back, which Sporting Fingal exploited and in the 92nd minute Robert Bayley scored to level the game 2-2 on the night and make it 4-2 on aggregate for Fingal, which meant the North Dublin side were promoted to the Premier Division in only their second season as a club. To add icing to the cake Conan Byrne finished as top goalscorer that year with 21 goals.

The 89th edition of the FAI Cup ended with one of Ireland's newest clubs lifting the famous trophy. Sporting Fingal's cup run started in the third round in an away tie against Cork side, Blarney United FC. Sporting ran out 2-0 winners to advance into the fourth round, where they played fellow First Division club Athlone Town. They took on the midland club at Morton Stadium. Once again, Fingal didn't find many problems and won the game, 4-1. The win set up a huge quarter-final tie against Shamrock Rovers, a game that nobody gave Sporting Fingal any hope in. But as they did in their league campaign, Fingal defied the odds and took Shamrock Rovers to a replay, after drawing the first game 2-2 at Morton Stadium. The replay was another tight affair and the two clubs couldn't be separated within the 90 minutes, meaning the tie went to extra time. Unbelievably, Sporting Fingal scored the winner and knocked out one of the giants of Irish football.

At this point, many thought Sporting Fingal's name was on the trophy; however, they still had to navigate



their way past Premier Division side Bray Wanderers in the semi-final. The game was played at Morton Stadium on 25 October 2009 and those who attended were given goals straight away. Fingal took an early lead with Eamon Zayed scoring in the fourth minute and he doubled the advantage seven minutes later. Alan Kirby sent the home fans into raptures as he made it 3-0 on the day in just the 22nd minute. Sporting Fingal went into the break in complete control and had one foot in the final. The second half was a much calmer affair, with Fingal just looking to keep their three-goal advantage. Bray huffed and puffed but only broke the deadlock in the 74th minute through Gary McCabe. It didn't give the visitors much time to reduce the deficit and in the end Sporting Fingal punished them as they took more risks. Robert Bayley all but ended the tie in the 82nd minute when he made it 4-1. Bray did reply once more through John Mulroy, but it proved to be no more than a consolation. Bray also ended the game with ten men, when Chris Deans was shown a red card in injury time.

Their first-half dominance was enough to put Sporting Fingal into their first FAI Cup Final, in only their second season in existence. Not only was the famous trophy on the line, but qualification for the following season's Europa League would be granted to the winner of the cup. The club that stood in their way was Premier Division Sligo Rovers.

The west of Ireland club were overwhelming favourites to lift the cup at Tallaght Stadium on 22 November. The game was played in poor weather conditions and both sides found it difficult to create chances. It remained 0-0 at the break, with the First Division team holding their own. But in the 57th minute it seemed as though the game would be going according to script as Sligo took the lead through Eoin Doyle. It would have been easy for Sporting Fingal to play out a heroic defeat, but they decided to go for it,

and their courage was rewarded in the 85th minute when they were awarded a penalty. Colm James put the spot kick away which set up a frantic final five minutes. Both clubs went for it but it was the underdogs who snatched it late on when Gary O'Neil scored in the 90th minute to send the Fingal fans mental. The game was attended by 8,105, with most of them being Sligo Rovers fans, who returned to the west of Ireland empty-handed as Sporting Fingal won the game and the cup.

Along with promotion to the Premier Division that season and winning their first bit of silverware as a club, Fingal now had the Europa League to look forward to. Things could not have looked better for Ireland's newest club. However, their demise came even quicker than their success.

Halfway through the 2010 season, Sporting Fingal were to play a Europa League tie against Portuguese Primeira Liga side, Maritimo. On 15 July the club travelled to the Estadio de Madeira to make their European debut. It was a game that nobody expected the Irish club to win, but as usual Sporting Fingal surprised everyone. With the new signing of experienced striker and Republic of Ireland international Glen Crowe, Fingal felt confident, and it showed. The away side took a surprising lead in the 33rd minute when Crowe scored. Maritimo, a side that competed against European giants like Benfica, Porto and Sporting Lisbon in their domestic league, struggled to break down the Irish side and it looked as though Sporting Fingal would pull off one of the greatest European results a League of Ireland club had ever produced. That was until the 78th minute when Maritimo finally found the net through former Portugal under-21 international, Esteves.

The home side seemed to find another gear after that and took the lead in the 85th minute through Algerian

international, Abdelmalek Cherrad. A 2-1 defeat away from home would still be a fantastic result, but Sporting Fingal were not content with that and in the 87th minute they equalised through Lorcan Fitzgerald. It looked like Fingal were going to come away with a historic European draw until heartbreak in the 95th minute when Maritimo's Brazilian forward Tcho scored the winner to give the Portuguese side the advantage in the tie. The second leg was played at Dalymount Park, the home of Bohemians FC, due to Morton Stadium not being up to UEFA standards. The tie took place on 22 July 2010 in front of 2,150 fans. But whatever hope Sporting Fingal thought they had of overturning the first leg defeat was quickly extinguished when Maritimo took the lead in the 20th minute when Alonso put away a penalty to make it 4-2 on aggregate to the Portuguese side. It remained 1-0 going into the break and Fingal had chances to reduce the deficit but failed to hit the net.

It was the Primeira Liga side who scored again in the 67th minute to all but end Sporting Fingal's European campaign when another Brazilian, Marquinho, made it 2-0 on the night and 5-2 on aggregate. It would have been a harsh scoreline on Fingal, but they didn't give up and a late surge saw Eamon Zayed score two quickfire goals, the first coming in the 81st minute and the second in the 89th to make it 5-4 on aggregate and leave Fingal needing only one goal to force extra time. The League of Ireland outfit pushed but with their desperation to get an equaliser, they left themselves open and Maritimo took advantage and caught them on the break. Kanu (no not the former Arsenal man, but another Brazilian), scored in the 95th minute to end the tie at 6-4 to the Portuguese side. Sporting Fingal went out but could take confidence going into their debut season in the League of Ireland

Premier Division and expectations were at an all-time high for the club.

Back to domestic action and Fingal were more than holding their own in the Premier Division. They finished a respectable fourth out of the ten clubs competing. They also gained qualification for the 2011 Europa League. They even managed to remain unbeaten against the eventual champions, Shamrock Rovers, in the four games they played against them, drawing three and winning one.

But by November 2010, worrying signs started to show that Sporting Fingal were in trouble. In fact, it was worrying times for everyone in the Republic of Ireland. There was an economic crash and many had been hit heavily financially, with property developers going bust. One of those people was the joint owner, Gerry Gannon, who could not fund the Sporting Fingal project anymore and had to pull out altogether. It left Fingal with no real financial stability, with their attendances still too low to keep them financially independent. The Fingal County Council were not prepared to invest any more money into the club, concluding that their cash would be better spent elsewhere due to the financial crisis that was going on at the time. Attempts were made to try to keep the club going, but in the end, they were in vain and in February 2011 the club announced they could no longer pay their players' wages.

The final straw seemed to be the club's withdrawal from the Setanta Cup, a tournament that was played between the League of Ireland sides and the Northern Ireland Premier Division sides. The club were due to play Lisburn Distillery but failed to compete in the tie. Their withdrawal saw them replaced by UCD. A few days later it was announced that Sporting would not be applying for a League of Ireland licence and therefore pulled out of the league altogether.

*Sporting Fingal FC (Republic of Ireland)*

There were suggestions that they would compete in the A Championship but those plans never materialised and Sporting Fingal FC were gone from the footballing world in a professional capacity.