



## Sunday Independent

# Martin stuck to his guns... and went on to European glory

When the Irish boss defied his mother and dropped out of university, did he know what awaited, asks **Kathryn Hayes**



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**R**EPUBLIC of Ireland soccer manager Martin O'Neill has revealed how he once contemplated hanging up his football boots and returning to college during the darker moments of his early professional career.

In an inspirational speech at the University of Limerick, the soccer legend urged students receiving third-level **scholarship** awards to always pursue their goals and not let the vicissitudes of life damage their self belief.

Reminiscing on his brief college experience, the 62-year-old recalled how his mother didn't agree with his decision to drop out of Queen's University in Belfast where he studied law.

"I had a pushy mother who sent me in the educational direction... I had an opportunity when I was at Queen's to go and become a professional footballer at that stage and my mother wanted me to continue with education.

"After a very decent start in the game, and then a stodgy time, I think that perhaps the night that I held the European Cup aloft in Madrid in 1980 I might have said to my mother then, I wonder who was right?"

"But overall she had a point," he accepted.

When asked if he ever thought about returning to



**TOP TEAM:** Kate Burke of Ballinasloe, Co Galway, and Shane Brennan of Tullamore, Co Offaly with Republic of Ireland manager Martin O'Neill. Photo: Alan Place

university, the former GAA player who defied the ban and went on to manage Norwich City, Leicester City, Celtic, Aston Villa and Sunderland before taking on the Ireland job, replied: "In many a dark moment in my first couple of years I thought about it, but it didn't transpire for one reason or another. I remember setting up many lectures and tutorials at Nottingham University to do so at the time, and the law lecturer was very kind, he tried to fit me in as best he could.

"But remarkably that particular year we got promoted to the Premier League and the team, Nottingham Forest, went from strength to strength and I kind of pushed it to the wayside."

O'Neill admitted criminal law was one of the subjects that interested him most at college and he always loved to dream that some day he might have been a barrister.

"In my day, I think education, certainly in the professional game, took a back seat... Nowadays

thankfully, I actually think the opportunities for young players in the professional football game to continue their education are limitless and I think that's been terrific."

Mr O'Neill was speaking at the University of Limerick at the 2014 All-Ireland **Scholarships**, sponsored by JP McManus.

Lee Pollock from Newtownards, Co Down was presented with a surprise commemorative gift to recognise the fact that he is the 1,000th winner of a JP McManus third-level **scholarship**.

The **scholarships** are worth €6,750 per annum for the duration of the undergraduate programme chosen by the **scholarship** winners.

Combining the two educational **bursaries** — CBS Sexton Street, Limerick and the All-Ireland **Scholarships** — JP McManus has contributed €32m to a total of 1,014 scholars throughout the 32 counties.

Commenting at the awards ceremony, the billionaire businessman said: "I would like to commend the award recipients. Each of you has worked hard and you deserve nothing more than to continue your studies and excel in your chosen field and I wish you every success in the future."