

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY: **MR TREVOR WELCH**, Sports Broadcaster, TV3, on 7 September 2012, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Arts, *honoris causa*, on **DENIS IRWIN**

Chancellor, Registrar, President, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, it is my great privilege to present to you someone who is beyond doubt one of Ireland's greatest ever sports stars.

It was Vince Lombardi, the legendary American football coach, who stated that character rather than education is man's greatest need and man's highest safeguard. Because character is higher than the intellect.

Denis Irwin, throughout a long and illustrious career, proved conclusively the wisdom of Lombardi's words. It is fitting therefore that today Denis receives recognition for this character from the intellectual centre of his home city. And knowing the man as I do, I can state unequivocally that this recognition will be savoured and treasured as much as any he has received across the world of football because Denis Irwin is a proud Corkman and one of the sporting treasures of this great city of ours.

Denis Irwin is Ireland's most decorated footballer, Mr Dependable, the ultimate professional, unassuming, one of those quiet under-praised footballers who constitute the bedrock of any great team.

Born in Togher in Cork city, just a kick of a ball away from my own family home, his career is the stuff of legend. Growing up in Cork, he was educated at Togher Boys National School where he excelled at Chess in addition to other sports, and at Coláiste Chríost Rí Secondary School. As a schoolboy, he excelled in both Gaelic football and hurling and played at Croke Park more than once. On one occasion he even marked Niall Quinn who later became his team mate on the Irish Senior International Team.

Denis was a member of St Finbarr's Hurling and Football club which is literally yards from his back garden. I remember once the great Cork hurler Gerald McCarthy telling me that he had no doubt that Denis would have gone on to play for Cork at senior level in hurling.

It's a matter of record that at 14 years of age, Denis's technical ability was such that he was effortlessly able to kick a 50 over the bar. That ability illustrated a skill which proved

so affective throughout his club career with Manchester United and with the Republic of Ireland, a great skill from the dead ball.

As a Manchester United fan, one of my favourite personal memories is standing in Anfield and watching Denis scoring a breath-taking free-kick against Liverpool. It was as effortless as if he was brushing his hair!

It was soccer - the beautiful game of course - where he made his mark. Denis came to the attention of cross-channel scouts while playing for his local schoolboy club, Everton FC and Leeds United signed him up as a teenager in the early 1980s. But it was when he moved to Oldham Athletic that he caught the eye of Alex Ferguson, while playing against Manchester United in an epic FA Cup semi-final.

Ferguson knew from the moment he signed him in 1990 that he had a rare gem. To many people, his was Ferguson's most astute signing in view of his subsequent career. In total, Denis won 13 major honours with Manchester United that spanned a 12-year period with 529 appearances and 33 goals. These honours included: 7 Premier League Titles, 3 FA Cups, 1 Football League Cup, 1 UEFA Champions League and 1 Cup Winners Cup. Surely the pinnacle of his glittering career was the unprecedented treble in 1999, with the highlight being the Champions League final win over Bayern Munich at the Nou Camp - that unforgettable 90 minutes plus that soccer fans will always remember.

The great drama of that night, Alex Ferguson never underestimated the resolute defending of his team at important stages of that final before the astonishing climax that will forever live in the memory of all fans.

Denis was the solitary, ever-present figure during the double winning campaign of 1993/94 and a cornerstone of the side that repeated the feat in 1996. He skippered the Reds on his 500th appearance during his 10th year of service and again on his final home game when he hoisted the Premier League Trophy - his 7th title. He is United's second most decorated player with 13 winners' medals - only bettered by Ryan Giggs! He was selected on the Overall Team of the Decade - Premier League 10 Season Awards for 1992/93 - 2001/02.

When Denis left Manchester United in 2002 to join the club he supported as a schoolboy, Wolverhampton Wanderers, many tributes were paid to the Corkman, including one from the BBC's Alan Hansen who remarked: "That if you were to pick the best right-back and the best left-back since the Premiership began, Denis Irwin would have both positions."

My colleague at TV3, Mark Lawrenson once said to me that Denis was the best two-footed full-back to have ever played in the Premiership.

Sir Bobby Charlton named him on Manchester United's Best Ever 11.

Denis made his debut for the Republic of Ireland, almost 22 years to this day, gaining his first senior cap against Morocco at Dalymount Park. He went on to be capped 56 times for his country, scoring 4 goals and played in the World Cup finals of 1994 in the USA. He was an integral member of the team in the Charlton era.

Indeed, he is one of the few Irish players to have been capped at all levels.

I remember how proud I was that my neighbour from Togher was one of the men who made sure that Italy failed to score against Ireland on that famous day, in the Giants Stadium, at that 1994 World Cup, in the sweltering New Jersey heat, with over 80,000 watching. That 1-0 win over Italy was an achievement that rated with any achieved by an Irish team when you think the Italians went all the way to the final, losing only on penalties to Brazil. I'm sure Denis was very proud of the prominent role that he played that day in keeping the Italians scoreless.

Have we ever had a better full-back? I don't think so.

With a new role in the media as a sports commentator covering several tournaments for RTE and as a columnist with Ireland's Sunday World, Denis continues to have a solid link at Old Trafford having returned there following his retirement from the game in 2004 where he acts as an Ambassador for Manchester United on match days and he is as calm, cool and collected in his TV role as he ever was on the pitch.

Throughout his stellar career, his links with Cork have remained as close as ever, chiefly due to the strong Irwin family bond. The support and love shared by Denis' wife Jackie, his mother Maura and brothers and sister have been unwavering and consistent, which makes it all the more special that so many of his family are here today to share in this special occasion.

As a mark of the high esteem in which he is held at Manchester United, only yesterday, I received these very kind words from Denis' former boss at Old Trafford...

I couldn't let today pass without adding my good wishes to you on receiving the Honorary Doctorate of Arts at University College Cork. Having received a few of these myself, I know that you will be a little nervous, but no one can handle that pressure better than you - just think of it as stepping out on the pitch at Old Trafford! You were always a brilliant Ambassador for Manchester United football club and I know that you will be a brilliant Ambassador for UCC. Enjoy your day!

Sir Alex Ferguson CBE

Today, we salute him in his home city and it is more than appropriate and entirely fitting that this university welcomes into its community, one of its very own, the boy from Togher, Denis Joseph Irwin.