Rovers get boost for play-offs

SHAMROCK Rovers will edge cautiously forward to next week’s promotion/relegation play-off games over two legs against either Dublin City or Cobh Ramblers after securing a deserved draw with UCD at Belfield Park last night.

The Hoops brought a smile to the face of caretaker boss Alan O’Neill, taking over from the suspended Roddy Collins, when winger Cathal O’Connor was on target twice in the opening 22 minutes.

There were a mere 700 fans at Belfield for what was in essence a meaningless fixture, with College already well clear of the relegation zone and Rovers already condemned to the play-offs — and perhaps their last in the Premier Division.

But there can be no doubt that the Hoops fans will be out in their thousands next week as the team who have won 24 FAI Cups and 15 league titles seek to avoid relegation for the first time since joining the senior ranks in 1921.

The Hoops had the perfect start on 13 minutes when a perfect midfield ball from Marc Kenny found winger O’Connor in the clear and he coolly shot past keeper Darren Quigley from a narrow angle on the right.

And it was O’Connor who added a second just nine minutes later when he took advantage of weak clearance by Mick O’Donnell. A neat interchange of passes with defender Cathal Sweetman allowed O’Connor to crash the ball home to the corner of the net from eight yards.

Caretaker boss O’Neill must have been happy in those early stages after their recent run of defeats as the Hoops powered forward at every opportunity. But gradually the Students got to grip with game and pulled a goal back on 36 minutes after a slip by Rovers keeper Barry Murphy.

A cross from the right by Brian Gannon was misjudged by the unfortunate Murphy and winger Pat McWalter had the simple task of heading home from close range.

UCD had chances to snatch an equaliser in the second half, especially when skipper Tony McDonnell shot wide from close range. But with Kieran Foley and Brian Shelley dominant at the back, the Hoops defence held.

Then late on keeper Murphy performed heroics when grabbing a point-blank effort from Gary Dicker when it seemed certain the Students would equalise. But College were to have the final say when substitute Ronan Finn had the sides level on 87 minutes when firing home from 10 yards after Willie Doyle had created the opening.

UCD: Quigley; Mahon, Shorthall, Kenny, O’Donnell (Long 25); Gannon (Finn 67), Dickey, McDonnell, McWalter; Dupuy (W. Doyle 70), Martin. Murphys: Sweetman, Foley, Shelley, K. Doyle; O’Connor (Deniel 80), McDonagh, Kenny (O’Hal- loran 66), Quigley (Mendley 58); Shanahan, Rocha. Reference: John Feighery (Dublin).