

Former UCD AFC SuperLeague Referee selected to officiate at Dallas Cup

# Barman Sean heads for Texas to ref Dallas Cup

## OFFICIATING AT TOURNAMENT FEATURING LA GALAXY YOUTHS

MARY FOGARTY

**BRAY BARMAN** Sean O'Connor (26) will be pulling players up on their carry-on instead of pulling pints when he spends ten days in Texas as a referee for the international Dallas Cup tournament.

This is the first time an Irish referee has been involved in the tournament. It's invitation only, with youth teams from Manchester United, Real Madrid, and Ireland's own Shamrock Rovers among those to have taken part in the past.

Sean is well known across the county in Bray, where he has worked for the Martello and associated bars for the past three years.

However, he has been a referee for double that time. While Sean played soccer for Cabinteely as a youth, and loved it, the time came for him to choose and refereeing was for him.

On Saturday afternoons and Sunday mornings, week after week, his mental and physical agility is put to the test on the pitch.

You start with a beginners course and grade four, then work up to grade one, which is where I am now. That's one step away from refereeing League of Ireland matches, he says.

In a world of dreams come true, he'll work towards the 'School of Excellence', and ultimately FIFA.

Sean does around three matches at the weekend, usually a few schools and one college game.

He said that personal allegiances do not come on to the pitch, so if he supported one of the teams playing, that would be irrelevant.

'You take it so seriously,' he said. 'You can't allow



Referee Sean O'Connor is off to the USA.

yourself to be anything but objective and you'd be just as tough on your own team.'

Of course referees can come up for serious abuse on occasion, but Sean dismisses it as mostly banter. 'Only once did I have a close call. A player went for me but the captain of his own team dragged him away before anything happened.'

He agrees that adrenaline and frustration can sometimes lead to frayed tempers, and the ref is an obvious recipient of the rage. 'They're obvious-

ly going to vent on either their opponent or you' said Sean, adding that there can be some 'colourful' language on the soccer pitch.

His own training is pretty intense, with three sessions a week, one of those with the society in Dublin.

Starting, stopping, jogging, walking and sprinting all in the space of 90 minutes requires stamina and fitness, and Sean said that even a short break can set you back.

The evening before matches, he wouldn't even have one beer as the brain has to be as up-to-speed as the body.

There are 22 players, the ball, coaches and managers, subs, and in some cases assistants to concentrate on.

'But if there are no assistants and the referee is injured, the game stops,' said Sean. No pressure then.

In the forthcoming Dallas Cup, 180 teams from all over the world will compete for the title currently held by Fulham FC.

LA Galaxy, Eintracht Frankfurt and FC Dallas are just some of the teams involved from kick-off on Monday.

With up to six matches to officiate daily, he'll have his work cut out for him however organisers will arrange a couple of special evenings for the referees.

The Irish Soccer Referee Society has sponsored Sean's travel expenses. While there are no wages for doing the tournament, the experience is invaluable. The Ballybrack man will leave for the US on Friday with all of the best wishes of Bray and beyond.

UCD AFC has always had a reputation for developing some of the best young players in the country, however now they have helped to develop one of Ireland's top upcoming referees.

Having began his career as a referee in the UCD AFC SuperLeague, Sean O'Connor has now progressed on and has recently been invited to be the first ever Irish Referee in the Dallas Cup featuring youth teams from all around the world including; LA Galaxy, Eintracht Frankfurt and FC Dallas.

Sean still remembers how it all began for him back in 2008 when he took charge of his first SuperLeague game in the Division 1 Saturday and believes the SuperLeague game him a great grounding to progress in the game,

“I caught a bug from a great league that toughened me up. I learned the ropes in the SuperLeague before going to the DDSL and have worked my way up now to where I've been invited to referee the Dallas Cup in the States. The first Irish referee ever to do so. ”

Sean believes that none of this would have been possible without the support of Diarmuid McNally and the opportunity given to him to begin his career refereeing in the SuperLeague. He still remembers a player off one time SuperLeague greats, Bean FC, saying, "when this lad refs it's like Christmas. Everyone gets a card".

Everyone at UCD AFC would like to wish Sean the very best of luck with the tournament and hope to see him back in Belfield when he returns.