

Irishman brings soccer to future Beckhams

By DAN ISRAELI

Coming to America in 1999, Tom Creagh, a native of North Tipperary, Ireland, said he was clueless as far as American sports was concerned.

A soccer enthusiast his whole life, playing and coaching in Ireland, England and Australia, his new country has been slow to warm to what the rest of the world refers to as football.

Nonetheless, Creagh came to the U.S. (New York City, specifically) with the intent of spreading the global sport to the area's youth. He set up shop fairly quickly, coaching with both the Manhattan Soccer Club and Notre Dame Girls High School team.

He also met his wife, Deborah, at a restaurant in 2002, while the FIFA World Cup played in the background. "We both shared a passion for the game," she said. After getting married, the two moved to Long Beach in May of last year, where Creagh decided to expand his soccer coaching to a mostly unappreciated age group.

"I noticed there wasn't a soccer program for younger kids and wanted to provide one in Long Beach," Creagh said. What spawned from that idea was Pro Soccer Kids, a youth soccer program that offers lessons to children ages two to seven. The program began last fall in Point Lookout with 30 kids, and continued in the winter with double that amount.

Working with very young children, Creagh said, means there is an extra emphasis on teaching fundamentals. In the sessions they learn everything from stretching to warming up, and even get involved in some drills and scrimmage games.



Prosoccertots.com

COACH TOM CREAUGH, a native of North Tipperary, teaches soccer to students as young as 2 years old in his Point Lookout academy.

This spring, Pro Soccer Kids will return for its third season, this time outdoors at Nickerson Beach. According to Creagh, the program has been developing on good word of mouth from parents in the area, impressed with what the coach has been able to do with such young pupils.

"It's been great so far," Creagh said. "A lot of soccer programs lack motivation, so our parents have been happy to see their kids work hard." Creagh noted that his current staff of coaches are all fully qualified United States Soccer Federation (USSF) licensed, while he himself is also licensed with FIFA.

One of Creagh's assistant coaches is his wife, who grew up playing sports in West Virginia, but wasn't exposed to soccer until coming to New York. Mrs. Creagh has been training two and three-year-olds, who she said have been gaining a lot from the program. "It's great seeing these shy little children break out of their shell," Mrs. Creagh said. "And it's a great forum for parents to get together, to see how focused their kids are. It teaches them discipline in a fun way. It's quite inspiring."

The parents of the community have been very pleased with Pro Soccer Kids, made evident by the increasing number of

kids joining, expected to reach at least 80 this spring. Meredith Bloom, whose son Jaden, 3, is in the program, is planning on enrolling her daughter Madison, 5, this spring.

"It's a wonderful program," Bloom said. "It's non-stop, they're always doing drills back and forth. Watching Tom interact with the kids, it's amazing how he gets them to listen and work together. They're getting exercise, and the skills they need to move forward."

Those skills could be used later at Long Beach Recreation's soccer program, which currently caters to kids age six through eleven. Recreation leader Chris Paggi said he is impressed that Creagh has been able to work well with such young children.

"It takes a remarkable amount of patience to deal with kids in that age group," Paggi said, adding that the integration of parents is key to the program. "I wish him the best of luck. If he can get his kids to understand the fundamentals of the game, it makes our job all the more easier."

According to Creagh, the growth of the sport's popularity is most evident in youth, as soccer is the most popular program for children under 14. "The problem is when they reach an older age, because there aren't enough professional opportunities to pursue," Creagh said.

Soccer should receive some boost in popularity in the U.S. this summer, when David Beckham, the sport's most popular international star, makes his debut with the Los Angeles Galaxy of Major League Soccer.

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