

FORMER HURRICANE DEVELOPING SOCCER IN ALVIN

Since its inception, Kick-off Soccer's coverage of youth players has primarily focused on the Eastern District Division 1, which is considered by many to be an "elite" group of standout teams and players. We have, therefore, passed over many other athletes and clubs that also deserve coverage, and we apologize. Division 2 and recreational clubs are just as important to the health of the sport as any other soccer organization, and while we may have forgotten this, Brendan Keyes certainly hasn't.

Keyes hails from Dublin, Ireland, and has been involved in coaching soccer for over two decades. He played in Ireland for prestigious teams named Home Farm and Stella Marris. He came to the US in 1986 and played for South Texas and the now-defunct Houston Hurricanes. He was also the leading goal-scorer in five different seasons for the Houston Celtics in the HFA (Houston Football Association). Since retiring from professional play, Keyes has continued to practice and promote the sport of soccer here in Houston.

These days, Keyes is a freelance soccer trainer, working mainly in Alvin with his own organization, Brendan Keyes Soccer Schools. Alvin Soccer Club consists of Division 2 teams, and only a few of them play year-round. In the fall, Keyes works with these D-2 teams to help them improve their programs, and in spring he does skill training all over town. At present, however, most of his efforts are focused in Alvin, where he feels that opportunities for positive change are virtually limitless.

Last fall he trained eight teams at the Alvin Soccer Club. In light of their sweeping and substantial improvement, he has gotten offers from even more teams who feel the need for his assistance. By the fall of 2008, he will officially be working with ten teams in the Alvin area.

Keyes owes his freelance status to a by-law in the Alvin Soccer Club charter, which states that they cannot employ an official director of coaching. This is in stark contrast to nearly every other major soccer club in the Houston area. This means that he can't have any real input into the way the club is run, or in the way it conducts its operations with regard to games and practices. To begin with, he wants to bring in as many qualified coaches as possible to help build the teams up.

"I would jump at the opportunity to be director, if it was possible. It would be easier to bring in a qualified staff, and we would have certified coaches at every game on the weekends. Right now it's hard for me to be in so many places as once."

For each team Keyes trains in the fall, Keyes oversees one of their practice sessions each week. For the other sessions, he educates parent-coaches to run the practices for him. In this manner he is able to touch base with every team on at least a weekly basis, which he hopes can at least partially make up for the lack of professional coaches. Keyes is also concerned that the players he coaches aren't getting the kind of exposure they deserve. He's very critical of the level of effort that more esteemed soccer clubs put into recruitment.

"Division 2 players are quite often overlooked," Keyes says. "Division 1 teams will have these open tryouts and pick the best players who show up, but there are plenty of kids out there on D-2 teams right now who are easily good enough to play in D-1. They often either don't know about the open tryouts, or they don't bother trying out because they're afraid they're below the level of play. Good players also fall through the cracks sometimes because they don't get noticed or can't afford to play at a higher level without sponsorship. More effort has to be put into recruitment, and more money needs to go into supporting the players who need the financial help. These players are definitely

out there, and there's limitless potential in them, but nobody knows who they are."

Currently, Keyes is in training to become an accredited scout, and when he completes his training he will be certified to scout players for all levels of competition. He hopes to help youth and adult players reach the next level, by assisting in the scouting process.

"If you have a hard time recruiting, you need to start coaching kids at a young age so they can develop," he said. "I will be working with ten U10 and U11 teams in Alvin this year. My goal is to get these teams to the Super 2 level within a couple of years, then we'll still have time to develop players to the D-1 level by the time they reach high school, then the opportunities really start to open up. In the past, when a player gets to the point where they are capable of playing D-1, I will start to make phone calls to see if more elite teams or clubs might be interested in them. It's unfair to hold them back."

In addition to his involvement with D-2 teams, Keyes also does a lot of work with underprivileged kids. He hosts free camps for children every summer with guest coaches from around the world to help spread the advantage of professional coaching to those without the means to pay for expensive development training. On May 31st, Keyes will be hosting a charity camp off I-45 at the League City Sportsplex from 10-12 in the morning. All proceeds from the camp will be donated to St. Jude's Children's Hospital, a center that specializes in Leukemia treatment. Keyes shows great gratitude to his sponsors who help him carry out such events. "I would like to thank Tony and Angelo from Angelo's Pizza & Pasta, Bay Area Trophies, Las Haciendas (Webster) and Dr Keith Birkenson (Chiropractor).

Written by Knox Howe



Above: Brendan with his favourite shirt, a reminder of his days with the Houston Hurricanes.