

Martin O'Neill Enjoys His Day in Waterford



Republic of Ireland manager Martin O'Neill pictured with Ray and John Finnegan and Tom Barry.

Republic of Ireland manager Martin O'Neill enjoyed his first visit to Waterford City on Tuesday, May 20th, coinciding with his announcing his squad for the four-match series of summer friendlies.

Having visited City Hall where he met with Mayor John Cummins before crossing The Mall to check out the House of Waterford Crystal, the former Celtic and Aston Villa boss rounded off his day with a Q&A session in Dunmore East.

At a packed Strand Inn, where I suspect he fielded tougher questions from several 10-year-olds than he had had from the fourth estate earlier, O'Neill proved his typically good humoured self.

Welcomed to Dunmore by 3 Chief Executive Robert Finnegan, and in the company of FAI Chief Executive John Delaney, O'Neill shot the breeze with our own Matt Keane before a packed Strand audience.

"I hope to be in the job for quite considerable time, and I have to say it's also lovely to be here this evening, with the beautiful harbour and the view here behind me and the great welcome I've received," he began.

"John O'Shea had told me how beautiful Waterford was; I didn't really believe him but I'm inclined to believe now that he is absolutely right. I appreciate the great crowd that turned out here tonight and believe me, as I said to John (Delaney) earlier; it's absolutely no hardship on my behalf to be here.

"And it's great to see so many young people here too; a lot of them are probably wondering who I am, they'll have to ask their parents who the guy with the glasses is! But I have to say it's been a most pleasant day, and one I've greatly enjoyed."

Prior to arriving in Dunmore, O'Neill attended a Villa/Tramore juvenile fixture, featuring a son of John Delaney's in Villa colours but alas, all the more surprising following seven successive wins, the hosts went down 6-1.

"I gave them a team talk beforehand, in which I told them 'come on, lads, you can win the game', and they were four-nil down after three minutes, so the team talk clearly worked! But I heard one of the lads saying to their manager 'they should sack him!'"

This was followed by a question from an audience member barely in double figures who queried "How does it feel to get sacked?" with O'Neill replying "I can see that these questions are going to go right to the bone!"

With both John O'Shea and Daryl Murphy in the squad, and the prospect of a call-up for goalkeeper Brian Murphy spoken of last week, Martin O'Neill saluted Murphy's excellent form with Ipswich over the past campaign.

"He's had a really decent season; I brought him into the last squad and he got on for a few moments at the end, and with a number of matches coming up, he'll certainly feature, he may even start one of those games, and really the rest is to Daryl to try stake a place in the team, and that would be great if that's the case."

Of O'Shea (who'd been in The Spinnaker just hours earlier), who helped steer Sunderland away from relegation thanks to a remarkable run of form in the closing matches of the season, O'Neill was pleased for his 95-times capped centre-back and former club.

Once the sugar had settled in the systems of the youngsters present, Matt asked O'Neill about the latest Stephen Ireland episode, and the Irish manager offered a reply more diplomatic than what the Stoke midfielder's lack of good manners warrants.

"The bottom line is this: Stephen has just signed a contract with Stoke City, he's got into the team, he played in the last couple of matches but I don't think he really has his mind yet on Ireland (the country, that is).

"Let me put it this way, as I said to the press earlier, I'm not going to chase it. It's still there, it's still open, if he wants to come and play for the Republic, then that remains open, but I'm not going to chase it.

"The players that we have in the squad all want to come and play, and they all want to stake a place in the team for September, which is great. I won't be chasing but that's not saying that I've not closed the door on it, but Stephen is going to have to come to me."

The summer friendlies, which began against Turkey on Sunday last, will allow O'Neill to try out a range of players while using different systems ahead of the Euro 2016 Qualifiers which kick off this autumn.

"I know these matches are coming at the end of a long club season, but in fairness to the players, all of them are keen to play and that's a great tribute to them.

"Since I've come in last November, the players have been great; they all want to play for the Republic. They've got really decent spirit, and of course spirit alone is not enough to win football matches, but that spirit is inherently there and it's just a matter of that bit of talent and that little bit of luck coming to the fore at the right time for us."

Praising the role of his assistant Roy Keane thus far ("he's been a great influence on the players") and the impact of Brian Clough on both his and Keane's football philosophy, an audience with Martin O'Neill proved suitably insightful and entertaining.

One hopes he'll come our way again very soon.