

United need big display to close gap on leaders

Asignificant crowd should be attracted to Terryland Park tomorrow night when Galway United host Athlone Town in a critical first division encounter.

Both sides have made erratic starts to the season and the stakes will be high as United need to register a victory after last week's woeful away defeat in Dundalk. United failed to deliver in Oriel Park and Philly Hughes slammed home the only goal of a drab game to pillar a league win for the hosts.

Now United are under serious pressure to gain positive result on home soil against a similarly inconsistent Athlone Town outfit.

The midlanders lost their opening fixture to Shamrock Rovers at St Mels Park, but have not been beaten in the league since. Athlone have managed to keep three clean sheets since the Hoops afforded them a footballing lesson on

March 16. Bohemians did smash four past Athlone in the League Cup, but that will scarcely bother the experienced Town boss Mickey O'Connor, who returns to the Dyke Road with a reasonable squad. Goalkeeper Danny O'Leary, Ian Rossiter, Tom Silke, Jim Sheridan, Mickey Collins, Padraig Moran, and Colin Fortune are all hardened Eircom League exponents, while Damien Rushe is an immensely promising footballer.

Hungarian import Istan Lakatos has impressed for the Town thus far, netting a splendid goal in the midlanders' convincing victory over Dundalk a fortnight ago. Lakatos' compatriot, Zsolt Petro, is another player who has contributed to an Athlone outfit that will make the short trip to Terryland with equal measures of hope and expectation.

A demanding home support will expect

United to demonstrate their prowess tomorrow. There were some neat glimpses of class against Finn Harps, but United failed to close the deal. Though there was a major doubt about the validity of the Donegal side's equaliser, United failed to ruthlessly punish the visitors in the opening period when the delightful Alan Murphy was fashioning opportunities with admirable frequency.

It should be an intriguing Good Friday joust as only a victory will suffice for United. Already seven points behind the enterprising Shamrock Rovers, United must produce an energetic performance. Lally does have a strong squad from which to choose, and with Alan Gough, Billy Clery, Ciaran Foley, and Murphy all capable footballers, the Tribesmen need to remind the local partisans that they can make a bold bid for honours this season.

Connacht Rugby and heart charity Croi have joined forces in an effort to tackle sudden cardiac death.

The Galway Sportsground has now taken delivery of a defibrillator, presented by Croi and funded by monies raised through the recent Legends of Rugby Golf Classic at Galway Golf Club. Dr William O'Flynn, occupational physician and Connacht Rugby's medical sub-committee chairman, welcomed the presentation by Croi, saying: 'This is a vital piece of cardiac equipment, which could literally help save a life in cases of cardiac arrest. Croi is to be commended for its ongoing commitment to pre-hospital cardiac care.'



Pictured at the presentation of a Medtronic LifePak CR-Plus Defibrillator to Connacht Rugby were: Connacht assistant coach Eric Elwood; Croi's research and medical director Dr Kieran Daly; former international Brian Spillane; Connacht Rugby CEO Gerry Kelly; and Connacht coach Michael Bradley.

Stakes remain high for Connacht and the visiting Dragons

BY LINLEY MACKENZIE

Connacht return to action on Saturday with a new focus on qualifying for Heineken Cup rugby.

Having exited the European Challenge Cup with a disappointing display against Newcastle Falcons two weeks ago, Connacht now face the first of five matches in the Celtic League when the Newport/Gwent Dragons visit the Galway Sportsground on Saturday (2.30pm).

The Celtic League route to Heineken Cup rugby is difficult. Last year Connacht were pipped by Cardiff for the play-off spot despite entering the last series of matches in a strong position. This year, given Connacht's poor start to this season, the task is more difficult as they are still adrift of Glasgow by five points and the Dragons by seven.

As a result the stakes for both sides are high, and Connacht's Michael Bradley believes his side is refocused on the challenge ahead.

"The players have professional pride and were disappointed with the performance in Newcastle. However we still have a chance to qualify so we need a big display on Saturday."

Bradley has delayed naming his starting XV although he welcomes back Darren Yapp who can be expected to line-out. However question marks still remain on the fitness of Keith Matthews and captain Andrew Farley, and as a result Bradley has named 24 players in his squad.

The Dragons' powerful pack proved more than a handful for Munster last week, and as a result Bradley might well be expected to beef up his forwards. That could well mean a start for Christian Short who has more experience than Dave Gannon, and also for Michael Swift who is a hard-hitting blindside. If Swift is brought in, John Muldoon may be moved to openside at the expense of Matt Lacey.

Behind the scrum Bradley now enjoys options with several players needing strong performances as the season comes to a close. New Zealanders Gavin Williams and Andrew Mailei have impressed in their brief appearances for the province, and Bradley could opt to give this pair a chance to impress. Matt Mostyn is the preferred choice at fullback, particularly against his former club side, and can expect to start, which leaves Bradley with a difficult decision whether to

omit Mark McHugh or play him in at outhalf at the expense of Paul Warwick or David Slemen.

"The Dragons played very well against a Munster side that had their full complement of European forwards and they were well beaten up front. We are expecting a good battle and need to utilise home advantage," says Bradley.

With contracts still on the table and players bidding for Irish A selection (coached by Bradley) for the Churchill Cup which runs simultaneously with Ireland's summer tour, there is no shortage of motivation on Saturday. The most recent signing of Samoan-born flanker Ray Ofisa - recognised for his speed, versatility, and ball carrying skills - from North Otago NPC side is a boost for the season ahead. First, however, Connacht must negotiate the next five matches and ensure their season concludes with some reward.

Connacht squad: Forwards, R Hogan, J Fogarty, S Knoop, C Short, A Farley, J Muldoon, M Swift, C Rigney, J Merrigan, A Clarke, D Gannon, M Lacey, A Gallagher; Backs, C Keane, M McHugh, G Williams, A Mailei, K Matthews, D Yapp, M Mostyn, P Warwick, D Slemen, T Tierney, C McPhillips.

SPORTS SHORTS

• There were mixed fortunes for some Connacht and Irish rugby players on Sunday. Three former Connacht players, Johnny O'Connor, Eoin Reddan, and Peter Bracken featured in Wasps' Powergen Cup winning side against Llanelli, but O'Connor was unfortunate to be stretchered from the pitch with a suspected neck injury early on. Llanelli talisman and Irish flanker Simon Easterby followed with concussion, while the referee another Irishman, Alan Lewis, was unable to continue the second half through injury, and was replaced by Simon McDowell.

•The sailing season has begun at Galway Bay Sailing Club with a hardy bunch of four boats taking part in the first race of the McSwiggans April series. In ideal conditions and a steady wind of force 4 to 5, team After Midnight with Patches crewman Ronan Grealish at the helm resumed their winning ways from last season and led by a reasonable distance after a good start. Hot on their heels was Henry and Marina Lupton's Quelle Surprise. Cormac McDonnacha and crew on Silver Foam clashed masts with Tommy Smyth's Catalpa on the start line. After sailing a six-mile course with some high speed runs under spinnaker After Midnight finished first on the water followed by Quelle Surprise, Silver Foam, and Catalpa.

•Galway United have appointed former skipper Johnny Glynn as a sports performance consultant to the club. Glynn, skipper and scorer of the winning goal for Galway United in 1991, has a degree in sports science and has worked with a number of organisations including Connacht Rugby and the GAA. Glynn will assess and assist in areas such as fitness, conditioning, work rate, discipline, and team development. In addition he will assist in youth development structures and liaise with the FAI and Galway & District League representatives. Galway United chairman, John Fallon, said Glynn was an iconic figure in the club, and was very experienced in sports development.

•The Umbro Galway Cup, which takes place in Galway in August, has reached a 70 per cent booking rate with recent signing of Aberdeen, Inverness, and Newcastle Royal

The big names who have signed up to compete in the 2006 cup include the FAI squad, Bohemians, Aberdeen, Inverness, and Newcastle Royal. Aberdeen and FAI will compete in the u-15 elite group. This year Setanta Sports will televise the action at Drom. The Umbro Galway Cup caters for boys and girls from the ages nine to 17.

• Camogie made its Australian debut recently with Galway players to the fore. At the annual Central Coast GAA Club's tournament in New South Wales, camogie was added to the card along with hurling and football for the first time. Five teams from Sydney participated in this inaugural camogie tournament - hosts Central Coast, Clan na Gael, Michael Cusacks, St Patrick's, and the newly formed Cormac McAnallens Club. Central Coast, with Galway's Sandra Tannian, named the best and fairest in the final, Janet Broderick, and captain Honora Mitchell carved out a win over rivals Cusacks.

• Power Soccer offers an Easter Camp in The Regional Sports Centre, Dangan from 10am to 2pm each day for boys and girls aged six to 13yrs. There is also a mini-camp from 10am to 12 noon each day for four to six year-olds to introduce children to group games and develop their confidence. The main camp costs €80 and the mini-camp costs €55 for the four days (April 18-21). For more information contact John 091-865350, 086-4089579.

• Galway has a new ultra runner. Athenry athlete Mick Rice produced an excellent seventh place overall in the Anglo-Celtic Plate 100K road race which took place Gloucester recently. Rice completed the 32 laps of the 1.95 mile circuit in a little over eight hours and 18 minutes (just over eight minute per mile average). Many of the club's runners ran in the recent Connemara half and full marathons which attracted some 1,600 competitors. Some 15 wore Athenry AC colours. Gary Doherty (32nd), Mick Rice (35th), James Lundon (87th), Paul Keane, Mike McMahon, Gary Begley, Mark Flannery, Liam Mycroft and Bridget-Anne Walsh all completed the 26.2 miles. In the half, Brian O'Connor (7th), Peter Delmer (18th), John O'Connor (37th), Alan Burke (48th), Michael Rooney and Maria Caulfield completed the gruelling course between Leenane and Maam Cross. The club run takes place every Saturday morning from the church car park at 9am.