“I never thought I’d get to play football again” – how amputee football helps to define the beautiful game.

Bohemians amputee squad. Image: IAFA Facebook

“The beautiful game”. We all know this term as it relates to football, but what does it actually mean? Is it the huge spectacle of tournaments such as the World Cup and Champions League? Is it the iconic players, these larger than life, almost God-like figure who are entirely responsible for millions of people’s moods every single weekend? Perhaps. Many of these players come from humble beginnings and inspire us. They show us anyone can make it to the big leagues if they’re talented enough, if they put the hard work in, if they have that belief. Whether playing in the Camp Nou or your local five a side, football is enjoyed by billions, most of whom have that belief. But what about those who come from a different type of disadvantage in life? Amputee football is just one of the sports sub-genres that shows us the true meaning of “the beautiful game”.

“Amputee football has opened doors to me that I would’ve never had” explains Bohemians and Ireland defender Garry Hoey. “It’s a fantastic sport, it gives you great opportunities, it helps with everything throughout your life because you’ll be fitter, you’ll be stronger, you’ll be driven’.

Hoey, 45, is one of the most experienced amputee players in the country, having made his international debut in 2013. After he lost his leg in a workplace accident, the Dundalk native

could not have possibly imagined the career that followed, sharing how he thought his footballing days were done.

“I never thought I’d get to play football again”.

Hoey has played in World Cups, Champions Leagues and European Championships, but he says his favourite career moment was helping Ireland beat England 3-2 in a friendly last year. Described as a “Roy Keane type player” on the IAFA website, Hoey used to play in midfield, but now prefers a role in the defence due to what he admits is age going against him.

Garry Hoey

Despite his age, Hoey can still cut it on the pitch, and not just against fellow amputees. He talks about how playing pick-up games with able bodied people helps to break negative stigma around his disability.

“It does be great when someone new comes along, and they’re looking at me going ‘what’s this fella doing here playing football, and he’s only one leg?’, and then I’m able to cross the ball, I’m able to run, I’m able to tackle, I’m able to do everything they can do, and maybe even better”.

But what’s the difference between traditional football and the amputee version?

“The obvious is outfield players are missing a leg. The goalkeepers then are missing a hand or an arm” he bluntly puts it.

Besides the obvious, there are a number of other tweaks to amputee football that differentiate it from what you might see on TV. Amputees play 7 a side games played on smaller pitches in 25 minute halves. Both teams are allowed a time out of one minute, once per game, and roll-on, roll-off substitutions ensure everyone gets a game.

“It doesn’t make any difference if you start or not, because if you’re on the bench, you’re going to play a role in it anyway”.

Another contrast to the more popular football is scale, with the league having only three teams – Hoey’s Bohemians, fellow Dublin side Shamrock Rovers and reigning champions Cork City. But despite the lack of clubs, Hoey insists that the game is still enjoyable.

“When people come and see the game live, they just love seeing it,
because it’s something completely different”.

One could hardly argue with this statement when watching the most recent round of IAFA National League fixtures in Dalymount Park. The 20 or so in attendance seemed to thoroughly enjoy their unconventional day out, with many of them being first time viewers.

All three teams play each other on the same day about once a month, and March 23rd provided a particularly entertaining round of fixtures. Bohs edged out Rovers 1-0 in the opener. Rovers then bounced back with a dominant 3-1 win against Cork, before the champions suffered their second loss of the day, 3-2 at the hands of Bohs.

Bohs v Rovers at Dalymount Park

Some excellent talent was on display, and it was clear to see what it means for each and every player out there. As referee Sarah Dyas shared before the days fixtures:

“The passion and the buzz that the lads have for this sport really makes it. There’s just something about it – it’s great to watch, it’s great to be involved in” she said.

You could really sense this love of the game from everyone involved at Dalymount Park. So why has amputee football yet to really kick off in a major way in Ireland?

“I think it’s really just about promotion. I wouldn’t have known much about it prior to being asked in, I didn’t even know we had amputee football in the country at all until I was asked in” admitted Dyas.

Dyas, who has been refereeing football for 13 years and amputee football since last year, is confident that if spectators would give the sport a chance, they would not be disappointed.

“I think once someone watches it and sees it for the first time, they’ll see exactly what it’s all about”.

Hoey agrees with Dyas’ assessment, citing awareness as a major factor behind the somewhat stagnant growth of Irish amputee football.

“If more people knew about the game, more people would come to see the game” he said.

But it’s not just fans that the IAFA are struggling to find. Hoey also admits that players have been hard to come by as well.

“We struggle with finding people in Ireland who have lost a limb who want to take up playing football” he conceded. “What’s holding it back is player base. If we could find more players, it would be great to get it to four teams”.

Hoey also described how the Turkish and Polish amputee leagues play a part in halting the development of the game in other countries throughout Europe. The allure of these professional leagues is too good to refuse for many who play in amputee football’s largely amateur scene, especially considering how a transfer to one of these clubs will see expenses such as flights and accommodation taken care of. While Hoey understands why players go to these leagues, he also points out the negative effects of leaving for greener pastures.

“I think it’s holding it back in your own country. We have three teams here. Imagine if half our players went over to play in the Polish league”

Like most amputee players, Hoey works full-time, and has to balance his footballing responsibilities with his work and home life.

“It’s a lot to take on, working, training, and then whatever else that has to go along with doing it… there are times when you don’t have any free time” he confessed.

In addition to being a player, the Bohs man also volunteers as a coach in the FAI Football For All scheme, where he trains kids with learning difficulties.

“The door shouldn’t be closed to anyone, no matter what sort of disability you have. Football For All is there for them as it was for me when I lost my leg”

Also an IAFA council member, one of his duties' is to help arrange flights and accommodation for the Ireland team as they prepare for this summer's European Championships in France, which will be the third of Hoey's career. But he says funding from the FAI doesn't go far enough.

"The Euros this year, we reckon it could cost us about 35,000 to get there. We don't get that level of funding at all, so we rely on sponsorship and donations" he explains, before adding that "so far, we've been lucky enough, we haven't had to pay anything out of our own pocket" due to the fundraising efforts of the IAFA.

For an organisation who made over 24 million in 2022 through match related and commercial revenue, 35,000 seems like a fairly small commitment, but the dedication and passion for the game shown by Hoey and everyone else in the IAFA really encapsulates the meaning of the phrase "the beautiful game", showing us how football is for everyone.