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UEFA FIELD LAB STRATEGIC REPORT: DEVELOPING A CONCEPTUAL
FRAMEWORK FOR THE GROWTH OF AMPUTEE FOOTBALL IN UKRAINE

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Abstract

This thesis explores strategies to develop amputee football in Ukraine, with the aim of increasing participation to 1,000 players by 2025. In collaboration with UEFA and the Ukrainian Football Association, it addresses the challenges through a six-pillar framework: Governance, Awareness, Funding, Infrastructure, Participation and Player development. This study highlights the transformative potential of amputee football to promote inclusivity, resilience and community rebuilding, leveraging stakeholder insights and global best practices. It provides a comprehensive model for the sustainable development of amputee football in Ukraine and offers valuable guidance for similar initiatives in other regions.

Keywords: Sport Management, Strategy, Strategic Framework, Adaptive Sports Growth, Amputee Football, Inclusive Sports Strategy, Strategic Sports Strategy, Sports Funding

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Table of Contents

1.	Introduction	3
2.	Definition.....	4
3.	Literature Review.....	5
3.1	<i>Amputee Football in the Global Context: Historical and recent developments.....</i>	<i>6</i>
3.2	<i>Inclusive Frameworks in Disability Sports</i>	<i>8</i>
3.3	<i>Participation Pathways in Disability Sports</i>	<i>10</i>
3.4	<i>Raising Awareness of Disability Sports.....</i>	<i>11</i>
3.5	<i>Governance in Disability Sports and Amputee Football</i>	<i>13</i>
4.	Strategic Framework	15
5.	Analysis	17
5.1	<i>SWOT Analysis</i>	<i>17</i>
5.1.1	Strengths	17
5.1.2	Weaknesses	18
5.1.3	Opportunities	19
5.1.4	Threats	20
5.2	<i>Analysis based on the Strategic Framework</i>	<i>20</i>
5.2.1	Governance.....	20
5.2.2	Awareness.....	22
5.2.3	Participation.....	25
5.2.4	Player Development	27
6.	Roadmap	30
7.	Conclusion.....	33
8.	Work Project Limitations.....	35
	References.....	36
	<i>Figures.....</i>	<i>39</i>
	<i>Visual and Digital Resources.....</i>	<i>42</i>
	<i>Testimonial from the Partners</i>	<i>45</i>
	<i>Interviews</i>	<i>46</i>

1. Introduction

Margaret Mead said the first sign of human civilization was healing a broken femur. She explained that a broken leg is fatal for an animal because it prevents hunting, fleeing from predators and survival alone. Healing a broken femur in early societies showed a community's commitment to care for the injured, ensuring they could recover and reintegrate (Mike Spivey 2024). This idea symbolizes the situation in Ukraine today. Amputee football has the potential to heal not only individual bodies but also the collective spirit of a nation.

This master's thesis, in collaboration with UEFA and the Ukrainian Football Association (UAF), addresses the need to establish the right structure and strategy for the development of amputee football. The aim is to encourage participation, create a competitive structure and make amputee football accessible to as many people as possible. As the war with Russia approaches its third year, the UAF estimates that 100,000 Ukrainians have lost their limbs. The UAF aims to grow its player base from 80 to 1,000 by the end of 2025. This figure is expected to rise as the war continues, with around a quarter of Ukraine's territory affected by landmines (Anna Bernasconi and Emilio Romeo 2024). A comprehensive strategy for amputee football will therefore contribute to the rehabilitation of a significant part of the Ukrainian society. Currently, Ukraine's amputee football clubs are MSC Dnipro (Cherkasy), FC Pokrova AMP (Lviv), Shakhtar Stalevi (Shchaslyve), TC Bannikov (Kyiv) and FC Octopus AMP (Odesa). The women's club Maximum is active in Zolotonosha. The "League of the Mighty" is being set up to formalise the competition. This research aims to answer the following questions:

1. What best practices can be identified from existing amputee and adaptive sports programs?
2. How can these practices be adapted to amputee football development in Ukraine?

3. What structural, financial and community support structures are essential for building a sustainable amputee football ecosystem in Ukraine?

This thesis adopts a mixed methods approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative research, to construct a strategic framework for the development of amputee football in Ukraine. The qualitative component includes semi-structured interviews with stakeholders, analysing best practices, challenges and opportunities for growth in the adaptive sports ecosystem. The quantitative analysis complements this by assessing financial data and resource allocation, providing an understanding of the current state and potential of the sport. Primary data will be collected from expert interviews, while secondary data from case studies and academic literature will provide comparative and contextual insights.

The principal aim of the research is to establish a sustainable framework for amputee football in Ukraine, combining international best practices with strategies tailored to Ukraine's distinctive needs and challenges. Strategic tools such as a SWOT analysis will assess factors affecting amputee football in Ukraine. Based on our findings, the thesis will propose actionable recommendations using a six-pillar framework. Ultimately, this thesis will provide a practical roadmap for the development of amputee football in Ukraine, enabling the UAF to expand access and establish a sustainable and competitive league. To ensure the project's success, the thesis involved bi-weekly meetings with UEFA with the objective of monitoring and directing the project's development. The strategic framework was presented on 7th of November 2024 to the UAF and UEFA stakeholders, receiving positive feedback and clear endorsement of the project's direction and collaboration.

2. Definition

Disabled football refers to adapted versions of football designed to be inclusive for people with a range of disabilities. These adaptations make it possible for people with physical, sensory and intellectual impairments to take part in the sport (Stones, Ahmed and Weiler 2014). This

inclusion highlights their rights and presence while addressing the high rates of physical inactivity associated with health risks and premature death. Adapted football not only improves fitness and well-being, but also fosters a sense of belonging, leading to a more inclusive and healthier society (Stones, Ahmed and Weiler 2014).

An amputee is a person who has undergone surgical removal of a limb or part of a limb, resulting in the absence of that limb segment. This includes both congenital limb deficiencies and acquired amputations due to trauma, disease, or other medical conditions. According to a study made in the U.K., military amputees are generally younger, with a median age of 24 years, compared to civilian amputees, who have a median age of 48 years (Edwards et al. 2016).

Amputee football, governed by the World Amputee Football Federation (WAFF), modifies FIFA rules to suit athletes with limb deficiencies. The sport is played on a 60 x 40 metre pitch (Figure 1) and each team consists of seven players: Six outfield players with limb deficiencies and one goalkeeper with an arm amputation or disability, who must restrict their residual limb within their jersey during play. Players rely on forearm crutches for mobility, but using crutches or limbs to control the ball incurs a direct free kick or penalty if within the goal area. Goalkeepers are restricted to their penalty area, with violations resulting in yellow or red cards. The matches are played in 25-minute halves with no offside rule and no sliding tackles (World Amputee Football Federation 2005). The sport's athleticism was celebrated worldwide when Marcin Olesky's scissors kick won the 2023 Puskas Award.

3. Literature Review

This literature review investigates the development of amputee football, its role in rehabilitation and inclusion and its challenges. To develop a strategy for the growth of amputee football in Ukraine, best practices and lessons learned from around the world will be identified.

3.1 Amputee Football in the Global Context: Historical and recent developments

The starting point for Amputee Football

According to WAFF, amputees were seen playing football on crutches in post-war Europe as early as the 1900s, but modern amputee football really began in the 1980s. The story goes that Don Bennett, who lost a leg in a boating accident, was in his backyard in Seattle while children were playing basketball. The basketball rolled towards him because of a misplaced pass. On crutches and without his prosthetic leg, Bennett instinctively kicked the ball back. As an accomplished skier, Bennett was inspired and thought: "If we can ski on one leg, why can't we play football on one leg?" (USA Amputee Soccer 2023). Therefore, he gathered seven fellow amputee skiers to stay fit during the off-season. Their games quickly gained popularity and local limb centres began referring new amputees to join the group. This was the beginning of modern amputee football. The beginnings of organised amputee football must also be attributed to Bill Barry, a coach in Seattle who played a key role in promoting the sport. He used his coaching expertise to run the team under the Seattle Handicapped Sports and Recreation Association, while also acting as a recruiter and fundraiser (Frère 2007). Barry's strategy included attracting media attention through exhibition games at major sporting events, which led to the first International Amputee Football Tournament in Seattle in 1984, featuring teams from the USA, Canada and Central America.

Between 1986 and 1991, Boeing Aircraft Company was a major sponsor of the annual International Amputee Football Championships (Frère 2007). In 1986, an amputee soccer match was held during halftime of a soccer game in Canada and was watched by 47,000 fans. In the same year, Mr Barry founded Amputee Soccer International. This was the first governing body for the sport, and he led the international development of the game. A key step was to adapt the rules of the game specifically for amputees. His first international success story was in El Salvador, where he helped form a national team from the former military amputees left

over from the country's civil war. Emphasising the rehabilitative benefits of the game, Barry's expansion efforts targeted amputee sports and health organisations (Frère 2007).

The 1990 tournament in Seattle already featured teams from the USA, England, Russia, Brazil and Canada, while the first event outside the USA took place in Tashkent in 1991 (World Amputee Football Federation 2024). However, growth stagnated due to organisational issues until 1998 when “ampsoccer.org” was launched. Steven Johnson, T. Feller, Rick Hofmann, Jim Frère, Yevgueny Zinkovsky and Georg Lunacharsky founded the International Amputee Football Federation (IAFF) during the 1998 tournament. Despite these advances, challenges like limited recognition, ageing players and high costs led to the dissolution of teams in Canada and El Salvador. The World Cup was held annually between 1999 and 2022. However, political issues and poor refereeing in 2002 led to internal disputes and the dissolution of the IAFF (Frère 2007).

A new era – The professionalization of the sport

A new era for amputee football began in 2005 with the return of the tournament to Rio de Janeiro. The event also saw the debut of Sierra Leone as the first African team, thanks to the efforts of Dee Malchow, a founding member of the Seattle team, who had introduced the sport during a charity mission. Moreover, at a general meeting during the tournament, the WAFF was formed (Frère 2007). While fitness and coaching standards were rising, challenges remained in refereeing and on-field discipline, highlighting the WAFF's mission to structure and raise the standards of amputee football worldwide. WAFF has driven the global growth of amputee football by supporting the development of five continental federations with over 50 members: CAAF (Africa), CNCCAF (Caribbeans, North and Central America), CSAAF (South America), AAFC (Asia) and EAFF (Europe). In 2012, the WAFF organised its first official World Cup, the 13th edition of the international tournament but the first under WAFF's leadership. The tournament was held in Kaliningrad, Russia and was won by Uzbekistan. Subsequent editions

of the tournament were held in 2014, 2018 and 2022, with Türkiye winning the most recent tournament and preparing to defend their title at the 2026 edition in Costa Rica. Women's amputee football also has become a key focus for WAFF. To support this expansion, WAFF has established a dedicated working group. Notably, two female athletes competed alongside men's teams at the Amputee Football World Cup in 2022. More recently, the WAFF hosted the first six-team Women's World Cup in Colombia (WAFF 2024).

In February 2015, the European Amputee Football Federation (EAFF) was founded by Mateusz Widłak and Simon Baker, inter alia. The EAFF acts as a unifying organisation for 19 national amputee football associations across Europe. Between 2015 and 2024, the EAFF launched numerous projects to develop the sport, including workshops for coaches and referees with the support of local associations. The European Amputee Football Championship, which takes place every four years, has become a key event in the growth of the sport. The first edition of the tournament in Istanbul in 2017 featured 12 teams, with Türkiye beating England 2-1 in the final in front of an incredible crowd of 41,000 at Vodafone Park in Beşiktaş. The championship has since grown to include 14 teams in 2021 in Kraków, Poland and 16 teams in 2024 in Haute-Savoie, France. Türkiye has dominated each edition, winning all three of them. In addition, the EAFF Champions League, which debuted in 2019, is another initiative highlighting the growth of amputee football in Europe. To further engage younger athletes, the EAFF also organises annual junior camps in countries such as Germany and Georgia. These camps offer young amputees the opportunity to train, develop skills, socialise with their peers and encourage lifelong participation in the sport.

3.2 Inclusive Frameworks in Disability Sports

Kiuppis (2016) argues that disability should not be seen as a deficit but as a unique way of experiencing the world, with sport providing a powerful platform to showcase this perspective. The existing literature presents three main models of inclusion in disability sports: segregation,

mainstreaming and reverse integration. Each model is based on a specific philosophical assumption that shapes its approach to inclusion.

The segregation model separates athletes with and without disabilities, creating exclusive environments such as amputee football leagues where participants only compete against peers with similar conditions. The dedicated leagues attract resources, sponsorships and specialised training, which assist in the development of a strong identity for adaptive sports, increase participation and enhance performance (Thomas and Smith 2008). However, this approach has been criticised for potentially reinforcing exclusionary behaviour, whereby disability is viewed as a defining characteristic. Cartagena and Pike (2020) argue that the practice of segregation can reinforce the perception of disability as a deficit, thereby reinforcing the medical model of disability, which views disability as a deficit to be "fixed" (Brittain 2004).

The objective of mainstreaming is to integrate disabled athletes into conventional sports programmes, with adaptations made to ensure safety and inclusion, such as modified equipment or rules. While it encourages interaction, genuine inclusion is often challenging due to the lack of accommodations. Laes (2018) notes that mainstreaming may inadvertently highlight differences between disabled and able-bodied athletes, particularly when adaptations fall short.

Reverse integration introduces a new approach to inclusion in sports by placing people without disabilities in adaptive sports environments, reversing traditional models of inclusion. The social model of disability emphasises that able-bodied people can participate in adaptive sports such as wheelchair basketball, creating shared experiences and building empathy. Kiuppis (2016) and Brasile (1990) argue that reverse integration helps to break down barriers and challenges the perception of disability as an essential limitation. However, some scholars warn that including able-bodied participants may unintentionally privilege them and dilute the unique culture of disability sports (DePauw 1997). Moss et al. (2020) found that reverse integration fostered empathy in able-bodied participants, while increasing self-esteem and

social engagement in disabled athletes. Clubs adopting this approach reported reduced stigma, improved social dynamics and inclusive competitive spaces.

3.3 Participation Pathways in Disability Sports

The participation of individuals with disabilities in sports is influenced by a variation of interrelated factors, including the availability of rehabilitation centres, the presence of supportive community networks and the implementation of inclusive programmes in educational and sporting organisations. Rehabilitation centres serve as pivotal entry points for athletes transitioning from clinical settings to community sports, with 58% of participants continuing to engage in sports post-discharge, as reported by Jaarsma et al. (2014).

Higher education institutions in the United Kingdom have facilitated greater participation in disability sports through the implementation of "critical pedagogy", which is designed to promote inclusivity and empowerment (Beacom and Golder 2015). Integrating disability sports into programmes encourages students to perceive sports as arenas for personal growth and social integration. Brittain and Beacom (2017) found that academic placements offered at the Special Olympics provide students with practical coaching experience, leading many to become volunteer coaches and contribute to the ongoing participation in disability sports. This approach has prompted greater investment in disability sports departments, enabling graduates to disseminate these inclusive practices throughout their careers.

The significance of grassroots initiatives such as "Amp Futbol Polska" in promoting the growth of amputee football for people of all ages and gender in Poland cannot be overstated. By creating stigma-free environments, they have made notable progress in advancing the cause of inclusivity. Their efforts were acknowledged with the UEFA Grassroots Award for Best Disability Initiative in the 2022/2023 season, establishing Europe's first amputee women's football team.

In post-conflict regions such as Sierra Leone, community-based models have played a crucial role in making disability sport more accessible and inclusive. The teams mainly made up of men who lost limbs during the civil war. Football is a way of regaining dignity and a sense of belonging, or one athlete said: "It made me feel human again" (Van Der Niet 2010). Similarly, Football fandom promotes inclusion by building community among individuals with disabilities. British studies show that fan rituals and family involvement strengthen social bonds and positive identities for those with learning disabilities (Southby 2013).

The London 2012 Paralympic Games demonstrated both the potential and the challenges of maintaining interest in disability sports. While initial enthusiasm was high, a post-Games survey indicated that only 19% of Voluntary Sports Clubs (VSCs) in England saw an increase in disabled participants, with fewer than 10% maintaining those numbers in subsequent years. C. S. Brown (2019) concluded that clubs lacked the necessary resources and knowledge to effectively support disabled athletes. These insights highlight the need for accessible entry points, comprehensive support networks and inclusive practices to ensure the sustained participation of individuals with disabilities in disability sports.

3.4 Raising Awareness of Disability Sports

One of the main challenges for disability sport in general, including amputee football, is awareness. Literature suggests that the stigmatisation of amputee football is a key challenge as people are not aware of the professionalism and athleticism of the sport.

Matson-Barkat et al. (2022) identified key aspects of how to effectively raise awareness of disability sport through emotional storytelling and strategic engagement. They identified the power of emotional storytelling to change public perceptions by portraying disabled athletes as resilient and capable, rather than limited by their disabilities. These empowerment narratives can be used to reduce stigma by reframing athletes as strong, autonomous individuals, reshaping public perceptions and increasing admiration. Disability sport narratives often portray disabled

athletes as exceptionally heroic or superhuman. While this narrative may initially seem positive, it frames disability as something to be overcome rather than an equally valid state of being. By emphasising resilience specifically in relation to disability, such portrayals may unintentionally reinforce low societal expectations for people with disabilities (Silva and Howe 2012). In contrast, when audiences emotionally engage with disabled athletes, they perceive shared human qualities and common experiences. This emotional connection promotes a sense of similarity, thereby helping to reduce the stigma associated with disability in the context of sport (Kearney, Brittain and Kipnis 2019).

Aligning with these findings, Yamashita and Muneda's (2019) study looked at what attracts people to watch wheelchair basketball, using a scale called the Motivational Scale for Disability Sport Consumption (MSDSC). This scale looks at the emotions and motivations behind spectator interest, such as admiration, appreciation of the sport's aesthetics and a feeling of empowerment. Admiration has helped viewers form a strong connection with athletes, seeing them as genuinely inspiring figures. Spectators were also drawn to the competitive nature of the sport, noting that the intensity and physicality of wheelchair basketball matched that of mainstream sports. The combination of admiration, aesthetic appeal and empowerment is essential for building a fan base and raising the profile of the sport. Additionally, the role of social media is important in promoting these narratives, allowing for broader engagement that fosters a supportive community. Finally, partnerships with media and advocacy organisations increase the reach and credibility of these messages, provided that narratives are respectful (Matson-Barkat et al. 2022).

Focusing on amputee football, the sport has gained significant attention in Türkiye through international competitions such as the European and World Championships, which have helped to raise awareness of the sport. The success of the Turkish National Team in these competitions has raised the profile of the sport both nationally and internationally (Kearney,

Brittain and Kipnis 2019). The emotional connection between players and spectators was also identified as a key driver of success (Aygün et al. 2020), which aligns with the findings of Kearney, Brittain and Kipnis (2019). The players were seen as role models, rather than “disability professionals”. An example of good practice is the “Yes I can” campaign ahead of Rio 2016. Instead of promoting a narrative of “super-disability”, like Channel 4's “We're the Superhumans” campaign for the 2016 Paralympic Games, the campaign emphasised talent rather than disability (Silva and Howe 2012).

3.5 Governance in Disability Sports and Amputee Football

Governance in adaptive sport plays a critical role in the success and sustainability of programmes. Effective leadership must navigate complex challenges, including financial constraints and socio-political pressures, to ensure the success of the programme. The ability to balance resource management with strategic decision-making is essential to fostering an environment that supports athletes, as well as staff and volunteers. A review of the literature on governance in these sports, including wheelchair basketball, indicates that structured governance is an effective means of attracting funders and sponsors, due to its promotion of transparency and accountability (Cottingham, Gearity and Byon 2013).

Effective governance also enhances public visibility, which is crucial for attracting participants and sponsors. Cottingham, Gearity and Byon (2013) discovered that effective governance in wheelchair basketball led to the organization of well-attended events and increased media engagement, thereby increasing public interest.

Whittingham et al. (2021) identified key stressors affecting international disabled footballers, categorised as leadership, cultural, logistical and performance stressors. Leadership stressors included insufficient specialist staff and the perceived prioritisation of non-disabled teams, which affected team morale and inclusivity. To address these issues, effective leadership must prioritise a fair allocation of resources and the establishment of appropriate leadership

practices. Cultural and team-related stressors were also significant. These included challenges with team cohesion and different attitudes within the team that affected collective performance. Addressing these stressors requires leadership that fosters a culture of inclusion and unity. Moreover, Whittingham et al. (2021) identified logistical stressors as significant. For instance, inadequate training facilities, inferior equipment and differences in the quality of kit compared to non-disabled teams, affected the morale and identity of disabled athletes. Effective governance should prioritise investment in infrastructure and equal access to quality resources to support athletes' performance and well-being. In addition, performance-related stressors, such as the financial burden on athletes balancing a full-time job with their sporting career, were identified as critical challenges. Comprehensive governance strategies should include financial support systems and flexible training schedules to alleviate these pressures and improve athlete retention and satisfaction.

According to Wicker and Breuer (2013) and Kitchin and Crossin (2018) integrating disability sports programs vertically into larger multi-sport clubs provides these programs with access to a broader range of resources, including accessible facilities as well as benefiting from established community relationships. This integration allows for a more efficient allocation of resources, with revenue generated from mainstream activities able to support adaptive sport programmes, thereby reducing their financial vulnerability. In addition, integrating disability sport into other club activities helps to break down social barriers and encourages participation from diverse groups, including older adults and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Kitchin and Crossin 2018). The cross-subsidisation of resources within these multi-sport clubs ensures that adaptive sport initiatives can develop within a stable and supportive environment.

Volunteering plays a vital role in the successful organization of sporting events. At the Paris 2024 Paralympic Games, approximately 15,000 volunteers contributed significantly to its success (Reuters 2024). Hall et al. (2003) stated that in many non-profit organizations, much of

the work is done by a small number of voluntary workers who often end up overworked. Building on this, Kitchin and Crossin (2018) highlight that managing volunteers effectively is essential for the successful integration of disability football clubs within mainstream sports organizations. Clubs that establish well-structured volunteer programs and strategic engagement policies are better positioned for sustainability and improved volunteer retention.

Moreover, disability sports clubs need to prioritise a strong commitment to staff training and development. This should ideally be formalised through clear policies. In addition to staff development, long-term strategic planning is essential to address organisational challenges and ensure the sustainability of the club (Wicker and Breuer 2013). Although many clubs, especially those run by volunteers, concentrate on day-to-day operations, it is important that they consider their long-term goals and develop strategies to achieve them (Wicker and Breuer 2013). Clear communication and a supportive organizational culture are also important, as they help volunteers align their efforts with the club's overall mission and long-term goals.

4. Strategic Framework

Based on our research, we identified six key pillars for developing a strategic framework to advance amputee football in Ukraine. These pillars are Governance, Awareness, Funding, Infrastructure, Participation and Player Development. Together, these pillars form a comprehensive approach to developing amputee football in Ukraine. Each pillar addresses specific challenges while contributing to an interconnected system that supports the sport's sustainability and growth (Figure 2).

Governance: This is the basis of this framework and ensures the consistent, transparent and long-term management of sport. Through strong Governance we aim to clarify leadership roles and responsibilities and emphasise collaboration with local and international bodies to set and maintain standards. It also ensures efficient allocation of resources, with investment

focused on sustainable and measurable growth. Through ongoing monitoring and evaluation, this pillar allows results to be assessed and strategies to be adapted to meet evolving needs.

Awareness: This pillar focuses on increasing the visibility of amputee football and changing public perceptions to promote a more inclusive understanding of the sport. The primary aim is to introduce amputee football to a wider audience and build a base that recognises it as a serious sport. By raising awareness, it aims to reduce social stigma and cultivate a positive image, which is essential for long-term acceptance and mainstream integration. To secure sustainable community support and attract potential sponsors, building this foundation is critical.

Funding: This pillar is essential to creating a sustainable financial ecosystem for amputee football, ensuring long-term growth and organisational stability. It focuses on diversifying funding sources, establishing mission-aligned partnerships and building a resilient financial framework that can withstand economic challenges. By understanding stakeholder priorities and capitalising on strategic opportunities, a strong financial foundation will provide the flexibility needed to achieve the sport's goals with confidence.

Infrastructure: The pillar focuses on establishing essential infrastructure, elements such as playing fields and changing rooms are essential to support a successful amputee football ecosystem in Ukraine. The core of this pillar is the creation of an infrastructure that can support players at all levels, from community-based programmes to organised league play. Within the infrastructure pillar, we aim to create a robust, adaptable foundation that will support the growth of amputee football in Ukraine and enable the establishment of a league that promotes both competitive and leisure engagement as an important part of an ecosystem for the sport.

Participation: The pillar focuses on identifying ways to increase the player base and build a strong, connected community around amputee football in Ukraine. Increasing participation is essential to building a stable foundation, as a larger community of players not

only increases the visibility and credibility of the sport, but also strengthens its role in Ukrainian society, helping it to become a recognised sport. This pillar will begin by examining effective approaches to reaching amputees and attracting their interest in the sport, followed by an analysis of the factors that encourage individuals to join and remain involved over time.

Player Development: This pillar aims to analyse best practices in developing opportunities for players to improve their skills and progress to higher levels of competition. By promoting an environment that nurtures physical and mental development, this pillar positions Ukraine as a strong contender in international amputee football, laying the groundwork for cultivating elite players to represent the nation globally. It is a competitive framework that supports the development of individual athletes while promoting broader strategic goals.

This framework serves as a basis for integrating amputee football into the Ukrainian sporting culture by promoting its recognition and value, while expanding opportunities for players, fostering inclusivity and strengthening community ties.

5. Analysis

5.1 SWOT Analysis

This chapter aims to assess the current landscape, analysing its strengths and opportunities, while identifying weaknesses and threats (Figure 3).

5.1.1 Strengths

A strong national football culture is a key advantage, with football deeply rooted in Ukrainian society and popular across all demographics. This cultural connection creates an ideal environment for amputee football to grow. Furthermore, with an estimate of more than 100,000 amputees, including many veterans, there is a significant player base ready to engage with the sport and embrace its cultural significance. Additionally, *established club networks and brand visibility* are provided by prominent football organisations such as Shakhtar Donetsk, which lend credibility and visibility to amputee football and enhance its legitimacy. In addition, the

“League of Mighty” provides a fundamental competitive structure that addresses immediate needs while creating a platform for future expansion. Another strength is the *strategic guidance and leadership* provided by UEFA and the UAF, whose involvement will ensure access to influential networks, strong leadership and effective strategic direction. This partnership enhances the sport's potential for sustainable growth and long-term success. Furthermore, *social integration* is facilitated by amputee football, which serves as a powerful tool for both physical and mental recovery. The game promotes community connections, reduces isolation, and inspires others by allowing players to become respected role models. These broader societal benefits strengthen the value of amputee football in Ukraine.

5.1.2 Weaknesses

A key weakness is the *geographical concentration of clubs*, which limits access for potential players in remote areas and restricts wider participation across the country. Without a more balanced distribution of clubs, the sport cannot reach its full potential or provide opportunities for players across the country. Another key challenge is the *lack of specialist coaching and medical support*. There is a shortage of coaches trained in adaptive sports and an insufficient number of qualified medical professionals, such as physiotherapists, to support the health and safety of players. This gap not only limits the development of players, but also raises concerns about their well-being during training and competition. The sport also has low public awareness and limited media visibility. Ukrainian Amputee Head Coach, Dmytro Rzhondkovskiy, exemplifies the resource constraints in adaptive sports, as he trains both the Ukrainian men's and women's national amputee football teams (RFI 2024). The *lack of mainstream coverage and public engagement* is a challenge for the growth of interest in the sport, weakens community support and limits sponsorship opportunities, all of which are essential for the growth and popularity of the sport. This limited visibility creates a vicious circle, as the lack of awareness further undermines the sport's ability to attract resources and expand. Hence, the

dependence on external funding is a critical issue. Amputee football remains financially vulnerable, with few diversified sources of income such as sponsorship or government grants. This reliance on external support makes it difficult to continue current initiatives or plan for long-term growth without a stable financial base. These challenges are compounded by a *lack of data on the impact of sport*. The lack of research into the physical, mental and social benefits of amputee football in Ukraine complicates efforts to secure funding and to demonstrate the value of the sport.

5.1.3 Opportunities

There are many opportunities to develop football in Ukraine. For example, *community initiatives* such as “come and try” sessions in partnership with hospitals can increase visibility and inclusivity, providing more entry points for potential players. In addition, *building national heroes* can further inspire participation by capitalising on national pride. National tournaments, public matches and training camps can showcase amputee footballers, especially veterans, as role models. *Media campaigns* using these athletes as ambassadors can change public perceptions and position the sport as a symbol of resilience and determination. In addition, the quality of the sport can be enhanced through *international partnerships* with organisations such as the EAFF and other sporting bodies. These collaborations can provide access to training, equipment and international events, raising standards and attracting sponsorship opportunities. The *development of psychosocial support programmes* is another opportunity. Addressing challenges such as PTSD through targeted support can make amputee football more attractive and demonstrate its value as a mental health initiative, potentially securing funding from health organisations. In addition, corporate sponsorship can provide an opportunity for sustainable revenue generation. *Social responsibility sponsorship packages* tailored to corporate interests can align with brand values and encourage long-term support for the sport. Finally, *digital training and community platforms* can extend sport nationwide. Virtual training sessions,

mentoring programmes and online engagement initiatives can connect players who may not have access to face-to-face activities. This promotes a broader and more inclusive amputee football community.

5.1.4 Threats

The development of amputee football in Ukraine faces significant challenges, many of which are the result of wider economic, political and social factors. *Economic instability and funding challenges* are among the most immediate. Ukraine's unstable economy, complicated by the ongoing war, makes it difficult to secure sustainable funding. *Limited government and private sector support* is often directed towards other critical needs, leaving sport with insufficient resources to operate and grow. *Intense competition for limited sports funding* is another challenge. Amputee football must compete with other sports and health initiatives for scarce financial resources. Without a clear differentiation strategy to highlight its unique value, the sport risks being overlooked in favour of more established or prioritised programmes. In addition, the *ongoing war* is disrupting stability, limiting safe access to facilities and reducing community engagement. These factors can discourage participation and affect relationships with sponsors and partners, making it difficult to encourage long-term support. The *potential over-reliance on volunteers* also threatens the consistency and quality of the sport. Volunteers have an important role. However, over-reliance on unpaid staff can lead to a lack of specialised skills and resources needed for sustainable development. Additionally, volunteer commitment is uncertain, making long-term planning difficult.

5.2 Analysis based on the Strategic Framework

5.2.1 Governance

Effective governance is essential for the development of amputee football in Ukraine, creating the structures necessary for operational efficiency and measurable impact. This analysis highlights the importance of centralized governance, role definition and accountability.

Baker identifies governance as the most important element in establishing and developing amputee football programmes, stating that "an association is only as good as the people in the boardroom". He emphasises that strong governance serves as the foundation for success, providing the structure necessary to set realistic goals, allocate resources effectively and maintain accountability. According to Baker, former Secretary General of WAFF and organiser of several amputee football initiatives in South Sudan and Palestine, clear leadership roles are essential. Passion alone, he argues, is only one part. Leaders must bring competence and a commitment to delivering measurable results. Governance not only sets the tone for the programme, but also determines its ability to adapt, grow and sustain itself over time. Without good governance, Baker argues, "you can't build a real programme or get financial support", underscoring its crucial role in driving effective and sustainable development.

The governance of amputee football can achieve meaningful progress through a thoughtful combination of centralisation and collaboration, capitalising on the expertise of established organisations. Kosta Iliev, Sports Director at the International Basketball Federation (FIBA) responsible for Wheelchair Basketball, highlights the importance of governance frameworks that benefit from structured efficiency of established centralised systems. FIBA's House of Basketball is serving as a centralised yet consultative hub for wheelchair basketball. It provides strategic oversight while fostering collaboration, streamlining operations, aligning initiatives under a common vision. This model not only demonstrates how resource efficiency and collaboration can co-exist, but also identifies opportunities for innovation, such as integrating wheelchair basketball into broader sponsorship packages. Iliev states that centralization builds trust among stakeholders, creating a system where donors, sponsors and other partners can confidently invest in a program. Through these partnerships, effective governance becomes a catalyst for growth. In Ukraine, as in the majority of countries, amputee football was treated as a separate entity and did not have strong collaboration with the National

Football Association. However, a centralized Amputee Football Development Office in Kyiv, under the UAF, could serve as the strategic hub for aligning national goals with regional efforts. For instance, Türkiye's success in amputee football is largely due to its comprehensive governance structure, which integrates the sport into the national sporting framework. The Turkish Disabled Sports Federation (TBESF) oversees amputee football and operates under the Ministry of Youth and Sports. This affiliation ensures dedicated attention and resources for the sport. In addition, the Turkish Football Federation (TFF) provides support and enhances the visibility and infrastructure of the sport (Daily Sabah 2023). This collaborative approach has led to the establishment of professional and semi-professional leagues, helping to develop talent and maintain competitive standards. Presently, there are three national leagues in Türkiye, and is regarded as one of the most developed amputee football ecosystems in the world. Strategic funding and support from both the TBESF and the Ministry of Youth and Sports has been key to the Turkish dominance of amputee football resulting in European Championships and a World Cup title.

Finally, effective governance should establish clear key performance indicators (KPIs) to track progress and accountability. These include monitoring the number of players, coaches, referees, new amputee football teams and event attendees, as well as the percentage of players from rehabilitation centers. Additional metrics should monitor workshops held, social media engagement, sponsorship secured and the utilization of current and potential playing fields. These benchmarks provide a focused framework for growth and continuous improvement.

5.2.2 Awareness

Social media emerged as a key theme in the expert interviews and is recognised as a cost-effective way to reach a wide audience. In addition, our experts emphasised the use of uplifting, positive videos to raise awareness and shift the focus away from disability. Simon Baker emphasised the importance of a professional approach to promoting the sport and that behind-

the-scenes challenges must not disrupt these efforts. He highlighted the power of social media to share updates that focus on progress, training and achievements, noting, "Even when things are falling apart, what people see should be polished and focused on the sport. That's what brings them along". Similarly, Kosta Iliev highlighted the role of social media and cross-marketing with FIBA in promoting wheelchair basketball. He explained that consistent posts not only increased awareness and participation, but also helped to integrate the sport into the basketball community. The synergies created through cross-marketing were significant. Regular media coverage can highlight the impact of the sport and create engaging stories that resonate with the public, including player interviews and behind-the-scenes stories.

Philip Broom, Disability Football Lead at the Brighton & Hove Albion Foundation, and Simon Baker both emphasized the significant role of visual storytelling in raising awareness and promoting amputee football. Broom shared how a Brighton video featuring Charlie Hewson, a talented young player, went viral. It demonstrated that showcasing the players journeys and skills can have greater reach and impact than traditional outreach methods. Awareness can be significantly increased through such content. Similarly, Baker stressed the importance of using uplifting, sports-focused videos to educate audiences and challenge stereotypes. In Ireland, where amputee football was often misunderstood as being about prosthetics, he used promotional content to highlight the athleticism of the sport and insisted that it be featured on sports platforms, rather than framing it as a human-interest story. "Ukrainians are already dealing with so much," he noted, "they don't need more reminders of tragedy". Furthermore, Baker stressed the importance of presenting amputee football in a way that inspires without making the audience feel uncomfortable. He warned against highlighting the difficulties of these athletes' lives. Instead, he advocated showing the skill and determination of the athletes in a natural way. This is in line with our findings from the literature. Yamashita and Muneda's (2019) emphasized that empowerment is key to engaging

audiences and Kearney, Brittain and Kipnis's (2019) argued that portraying athletes as relatable and skillful creates deeper connections and authentic inspiration.

Furthermore, ambassadors play a crucial role in raising awareness of amputee football. Charles Tiné, founder of The Small Projects Team, an NGO contributing to the advancement of amputee football in Ukraine, highlighted the importance of portraying Ukraine's amputee athletes, especially veterans, as national heroes. The men's national amputee football team has already 4-5 veterans on the roster (RFI 2024). Building on the country's deep respect for soldiers, amputee football can gain public support. In Türkiye, Captain Osman Çakmak represents how amputee football has become a powerful cultural force. His military background highlights the importance of the sport in supporting veterans to recover from war injuries. The move to professionalism, with players earning salaries, has strengthened national pride. Both Tiné and Simon Baker also stressed the importance of involving prominent public figures to increase visibility and credibility. Influential figures such as Andriy Shevchenko or President Zelensky could play a key role in supporting the project. Shevchenko a Ukrainian Football legend whose position as president of the UAF makes this collaboration particularly feasible, using his status to increase visibility. He has already started advocating for the game stating that "Veterans are the reason we are all alive today and have the opportunity to continue developing Ukrainian football" (RFI 2024).

Our analysis further underlines the value of community events in encouraging local engagement and building support for amputee football. Baker highlighted the impact of local amputee football days in parks, community centres and town squares to introduce the sport and build trust within smaller communities. Broom agreed, adding that reaching out to local sponsors not only provides vital financial support, but also strengthens the bond between the sport and the community. Iliev emphasized the importance of structured leagues and tournaments to build professionalism. A Ukrainian competition network could help athletes,

attract media and build a fan base. Mateusz Widłak, the newly elected President of WAFF, emphasised the importance of monitoring media coverage as a key element in the evaluation of the efficacy of sports initiatives. By analysing the visibility and engagement of sponsors across various media platforms, including television, online articles and social media, event organisers can offer sponsors detailed insights into the extent to which their branding resonates with audiences. Indicators like “Exposure” and “No. of Contacts” (Tables 4 & 8) demonstrate not only the capacity of amputee football to achieve a measurable audience reach, but also provide actionable insights which can be used to refine strategies and maximise overall impact.

5.2.3 Participation

This strategic pillar focuses on engaging individuals at all levels to build a national network that promotes accessibility and inclusivity in amputee football. Fundamentally, expanding amputee football relies on partnerships with rehabilitation centers like “Superhumans” and “Unbroken” in Lviv, which act as transition points from recovery to community sports. These collaborations introduce amputee football early in recovery, framing it as a step toward physical and social reintegration. Partnerships with clinics and medical suppliers, as seen in Germany, position sports as a natural part of rehabilitation, fostering lifelong participation. Heintz highlights the role of prosthetic technicians, medical practitioners and nurses as advocates connecting potential players to the sport. Moreover, Ukrainian schools and universities can increase participation in amputee football by integrating inclusive sports programmes into their curricula. Hands-on opportunities, such as coaching internships and partnering with disability sports organisations, give students practical experience while promoting a culture of inclusivity. This approach equips graduates with the skills to support disability sport and encourages long-term commitment.

Establishing a network of coaches with expertise in amputee football promotes skill development and interest in the sport. A unique perspective is provided by former players

moving into coaching roles, providing empathetic and experienced leadership. Structured programmes can attract individuals who are passionate about leading teams and developing talent. Similarly, developing refereeing and officiating pathways through customised courses ensures fair play. Volunteers and local communities are also vital to the success of amputee football programmes. Volunteers help with event organisation and logistics, while community events introduce the sport to new audiences. These efforts can create a reliable support network that strengthens the long-term sustainability of the sport.

Broom suggests starting with a “single successful session” to build a strong foundation. A supportive environment with qualified trainers, appropriate equipment and a welcoming atmosphere will ensure a positive first experience and encourage word-of-mouth promotion. Patience is key, as expanding too quickly runs the risk of stretching resources to the limit, which could reduce the quality of the service and damage its long-term sustainability. The first session may not be well attended, but if the people who do come enjoy it, it should be considered a success. Moreover, Sore emphasized the importance of regular weekly sessions to help athletes build routines and connections. Flexible scheduling that accommodates participants' commitments, such as work or childcare, is key to ensuring accessibility. Iliev highlighted FIBA's success with 3x3 basketball, which has activated urban spaces and attracted diverse audiences. Amputee football in Ukraine could take a similar approach, showcasing the sport in highly visible locations to generate curiosity and engage communities. Innovative formats, such as FIBA's 3x3 or Heintz's 5-a-side in Germany, could lower the barriers to participation.

Baker's example from South Sudan, where he invited able-bodied people to play with crutches alongside amputees, illustrates the power of the concept of “reverse integration”. This approach has the potential to stimulate interest, change perceptions and foster empathy, enabling the community to gain a deeper appreciation of the skills and resilience of amputee

athletes. A similar approach in Ukraine could increase awareness and support for amputee football, thereby encouraging community involvement.

In addition, the formation of mixed teams can increase participation by allowing men and women to train and compete regionally where opportunities are scarce. While Baker supports mixed teams locally, he advises against their use internationally due to cultural sensitivities. Importantly, he stresses the need to make amputee football fun and accessible to effectively engage young people. Initiatives such as junior camps create a supportive environment that encourages long-term participation by building confidence, creating friendships and involving families. These camps also provide valuable support networks for families, especially parents, by fostering connections through shared experiences.

Finally, participation should be monitored through standardised indicators such as gender, ethnicity and age to effectively assess impact and enable programme adjustments. Ukraine has the potential to develop a thriving amputee football community by strengthening links with rehabilitation centres, youth initiatives and prominent club affiliations.

5.2.4 Player Development

Developing a strong performance programme for amputee football in Ukraine requires addressing the physical, psychological and social needs of athletes for improvement. This may lead to improved public perception and support.

The player development programme should integrate medical and psychological care with athletic training, recognising that recovery for amputees goes beyond physical healing. Incorporating amputee football into rehabilitation programmes offers dual benefits. It improves cardiovascular health, strength and balance, and provides emotional support and a social network for amputees. Sore highlights its role in promoting mental wellbeing and social cohesion, giving players a new sense of identity and belonging, while reducing isolation and mental health problems. Establishing local clubs can bridge the gap from isolation to connection

in Ukraine, where many amputees live in remote areas. Teammates on the pitch form a support network that celebrates shared struggles and successes. Football is a tool for social reintegration. It helps athletes rebuild lives and relationships that are essential for lasting recovery. Sore, who has extensive experience in UNHCR's sports programmes, explains that these programmes are designed to develop life skills that go beyond sport. They focus on consistent participation and accessible opportunities to help participants develop teamwork, resilience and leadership skills. These skills contribute to wider goals such as social inclusion, cohesion and improved mental wellbeing. Sport empowers individuals, helping them to adapt and succeed in society, while providing physical and psychological benefits. Shevchenko emphasized this sentiment, stating, "Sport is a powerful instrument of the physical and psychological recovery of veterans, and also gives them new dreams and goals to aspire to" (RFI 2024). Baker's journey illustrates the transformative power of amputee football. After losing his leg, he found strength, purpose and community through the sport he describes as his medicine. Amputee football restored his pride and provided a platform to showcase his talent and resilience, shifting the narrative from disability to ability. Baker humorously said that it's one of the fastest growing sports in the world and that "people would cut off their legs just to play", explaining the intense sense of pride that provides a rewarding experience for players.

Effective coaching is critical to a player's success and requires both tactical expertise and an understanding of the unique needs of amputee athletes. Broom highlights the importance of empathy and role models, particularly the positive impact of coaches with disabilities. Meanwhile, Heintz highlights the overlap between training methods for amputee and able-bodied athletes, enabling adaptive coaching approaches. Coaches must also learn techniques specific to the use of crutches and the importance of safety. The development of a strong coaching network in Ukraine, supported by regular training, professional development and partnerships, will help to ensure that amputee footballers receive high-quality sessions that meet

both their technical and personal needs. A sense of belonging is key. Something as simple as a team kit to create a shared identity can help build pride and confidence. Most importantly, players should be seen as athletes, creating a positive environment that celebrates their abilities.

A sustainable development pipeline relies on effective junior programmes that introduce players to the game at an early age, typically around seven or eight. Structured junior camps, such as those in Germany, ensure a steady supply of talent. According to Baker, in England, junior programmes launched in 2016 now supply 90% of the national team. Moreover, age-specific structures, such as the U23 and U25 teams highlighted by Iliev, provide a clear pathway for young players to gain experience and develop before entering adult competitions. Baker believes that amputee football should be developed in a structured way, focusing on gradual progression while maintaining the unique identity of the sport. He suggests that beginners, especially children, should start with prosthetic legs or crutches based on what feels comfortable. This helps them build confidence before moving on to standard rules and avoids the confusion of mixed systems such as England's pan-disability league. Baker stresses the value of unified training sessions, where experienced players mentor newcomers to speed up learning and create a strong team dynamic. Early training focuses on basic skills, such as moving with crutches, before moving on to running ensuring that players feel supported rather than overwhelmed.

In addition, regional workshops facilitate accessibility by reducing the necessity for long-distance travel and reinforce community cohesion through social interaction. Baker places great emphasis on professionalism, comparing amputee football to the World Cup and urging players to approach matches with pride and discipline. He characterizes each game as a "theatrical show", where attitude and presentation are as vital as skill, shifting focus from disability to athleticism. Highlighting the sport's uniqueness, Baker humorously remarked, "I can do some of what Ronaldo does, but Ronaldo couldn't do what I do on crutches".

6. Roadmap

Our analysis outlines key pillars to grow amputee football to 1,000 players by 2025. Governance and awareness form the foundation, enabling funding and infrastructure, followed by participation and player development. Shevchenko emphasized the need to establish this within a five-year timeframe (RFI 2024). To address this, we developed a three-phase roadmap outlining the approach in detail (Figure 4).

Phase I: Foundation Building

Establishing a Central Governing Body: Governance is key to success, requiring a dedicated team with clear roles, responsibilities and standards. Integrating amputee football into the UAF can create valuable synergies. A defined mission, vision and purpose can position the sport as a powerful driver of change. For instance, we propose the following:

Purpose: Promoting amputee football as a vital part of the Ukrainian football community.

Mission: Grow amputee football to 1,000 players by 2025 and promote their talent, resilience and passion as a proud part of Ukraine's football future.

Vision: A game of strength, pride and inclusion seen by all Ukrainians.

Foundation of the Clubs and League: The League of Mighty, launched in November 2024, will begin with four clubs: "MSC Dnipro", "FC Pokrova AMP", "Shakhtar Stalevi" for men and children and "Maximum" from Cherkasy, the first women's team. This solid foundation sets the stage for growth. Establishing a sustainable league with 8 competitive men's and children's clubs within 12 months is ambitious but achievable, along with 3 women's clubs by 2025. While competitiveness isn't a priority for all clubs, creating at least one in each of Ukraine's 24 oblasts would ensure nationwide engagement in this inspiring sport.

Introductory Workshops: Workshops are essential to developing amputee football in Ukraine. These sessions should cover rules, practical demonstrations of skills like kicking, dribbling and passing with crutches. Partnering with WAFF and EAAF to create engaging

training videos will enhance accessibility, inspire participants and lay the groundwork for the sport's nationwide growth. Participation for such courses could be generated by the awareness videos. This approach could effectively reach the target audience, as illustrated by the following assumptions. As of 15th of December 2024, an amputee football video received 72,000 views on the UAF Instagram channel. Assuming 50% are local, this gives 36,000 Ukrainian viewers, of which 10% (3,600) may be genuinely interested. At a conversion rate of 3%, the videos could be the source of 108 new people interested in the development of the sport. Additionally, 10 training workshops of 20 people each for coaches, referees and other key personnel should be held by the end of 2025.

Awareness Campaign: Raising public awareness is crucial early on to convey the sport's value. A storytelling campaign highlighting the journeys of veteran and amputee athletes can showcase resilience, recovery and inclusion. Authentic narratives, supported by impactful videos on platforms like TikTok and Instagram, can engage younger audiences. An objective could be to increase the number of followers on UAF's Instagram account from 478,000 to 750,000 by the end of 2025. This goal is supported by a comparative analysis of the Polish FA Instagram account, which has 1.4 million followers (December 2024). Notably, both accounts demonstrate comparable engagement rates, with 2.27% for Ukraine and 2.09% for Poland highlighting the potential for UAF to attract a larger audience (Insight IQ 2024). Partnering with 3-5 ambassadors would boost credibility and reach. Holding public events in cities like Kyiv can introduce amputee football to communities, while reverse integration initiatives let able-bodied individuals experience the sport, shifting societal perceptions. A key opportunity arises in March 2025, during Ukraine's matches against Belgium, where half-time demonstrations could showcase amputee football to millions of viewers.

Phase II: Expansion and Engagement

Phase II will focus on diversifying funding, strengthening engagement and broadening participation to maximise overall impact.

Diversification of Funding Sources: Diversifying funding sources is key to ensuring financial stability. Increased awareness and robust governance should facilitate the search for funding. The UAF needs to clarify its role: should it support individual teams directly or should it focus on systematic league development. We suggest that teams should be integrated into existing club structures to take advantage of cost synergies and systematic support. Our benchmarking indicates that approximately €200,000 would be required to establish a league, although this figure requires further assessment, given that our current analysis is merely indicative. This KPI will need to be reassessed as the project progresses. Strategies should prioritise corporate sponsorship from CSR-focused companies and applying to bodies such as UEFA's NGOs with measurable objectives such as rehabilitation and integration. To avoid over-reliance on a single partner, the UAF should secure the support of at least five sponsors.

Collaborations with Locals: Partnering with local firms is key to successful, sustainable progress. Companies can co-sponsor, donate, help with logistics or provide promotional materials. Securing three local sponsors per team could be a good benchmark. Our analysis shows local sponsors are more engaged in developing the sport.

Infrastructure Mapping: The next step focuses on regions with high amputee populations to maximize impact. Partnering with clubs like Shakhtar Donetsk reduces costs, while integrating amputee teams into these clubs enhances synergies and funding opportunities. This builds on the awareness established in Phase I to expand the program's reach and impact.

Participation: Phase II should prioritise partnerships with rehabilitation centres such as “Superhumans” and hospitals to host “come and try” sessions to increase recruitment and participation. A key KPI could focus on reaching amputees through targeted outreach, including

information flyers and working with health professionals. As the initiative progresses, a target of 50% participation rate of the amputees targeted in outreach activities to the “come and try” sessions should be set and reviewed regularly. Additionally, integrating amputee football into rehabilitation centres could become a long-term goal, using its well-documented rehabilitative benefits to enhance recovery. Moreover, the introduction of a registration system will support sustainable growth, while public video training will improve coaching and refereeing skills.

Phase III: Institutionalization

Phase III aims to establish a self-sustaining operational framework to ensure the long-term success of amputee football and its national and global integration.

Player Development: The next step is to establish elite athlete programmes. For instance, an Under-21 national team will prepare players for international competition. It will promote excellence and highlight the global potential of amputee football. Training for coaches and referees should be developed through partnerships with the EAFF and WAFF, ensuring consistency with international standards and supporting professional development.

Infrastructure: Building on an initial mapping of infrastructure, which is likely to show a concentration in urban areas, future efforts should prioritise expanding access to underserved regions to promote equal opportunities and wider participation.

7. Conclusion

The project focused on creating a strategic plan to grow the player base from 80 into a thriving community of 1,000 members by the end of 2025. The research identified global best practice in adaptive sport and adapted it to Ukraine. The project identified opportunities to position amputee football as a tool for physical rehabilitation, social integration and national recovery.

This thesis addresses a gap in existing research by focusing on the strategic development of amputee football. The rehabilitative, psychological and social benefits of adaptive sports have been well researched, but limited attention has been paid to creating a framework for the

development of amputee football. This study provides a practical strategy tailored to the sustainable development of the sport in Ukraine, linking strategic pillars with community goals. The thesis provides a clear and actionable framework that bridges the gap between theory and practice, offering a replicable model that can be adapted to other contexts. By emphasizing strong governance and emotional storytelling, this approach reinforces the case for funding and positions amputee football as a powerful driver of social inclusion and sustained expansion.

The results highlight the strategic priorities within the framework. Effective governance is the foundation for all progress. A professional and well-structured team is the cornerstone for sustainable growth. Once governance is in place, the next critical step is to raise awareness. This remains the biggest challenge in adaptive sport. With a solid awareness strategy, efforts should then focus on securing funding and developing the necessary infrastructure. Once these pillars are addressed, participation and player development can be increased, growing the sport and raising its profile (Figure 5).

In conclusion, transparency, accountability and strategic planning are key to success. This helps to engage stakeholders, allocate resources effectively and build the credibility of the programme. Without strong governance, there is a risk that efforts to grow the sport and connect with communities will be inefficient and fragmented. Public perception remains a major challenge for amputee football. Emotional storytelling and the effective use of social media offer powerful ways to challenge misconceptions and foster admiration. Türkiye's success in presenting amputee athletes as national heroes shows how this approach can inspire public engagement. Similarly, engaging celebrities as national ambassadors can greatly enhance the visibility and legitimacy of the sport. In addition, financial sustainability is crucial for the growth of the programme. Diversified sources of funding were highlighted as essential. Lessons from Germany, Türkiye and Poland show how combining innovative financial models with targeted fundraising strategies can not only build financial resilience, but also provide the

resources needed to develop infrastructure. Accessible facilities, partnerships with established clubs and cost-effective solutions such as reusable equipment are critical components of the infrastructure pillar. Integrating amputee football into existing club structures can reduce costs, improve visibility and create a more inclusive environment. Furthermore, participation is based on a network of rehabilitation centres, grassroots initiatives. The centres are a key entry point, who link medical care and community sport, encouraging long-term engagement. Reverse integration strategies like mixed-ability matches build empathy and reduce social stigma around disability. Finally, player development is key to the holistic growth of sport. Coaching, referee training and volunteer support maintain quality and enhance the athlete's experience.

Future research should build on this study by investigating the long-term health outcomes of amputee footballers. It should be aligned with the strategic framework and identify new opportunities for development. Specifically, it should investigate the benefits of amputee football in comparison to non-athletic amputees. This research could provide compelling evidence of the rehabilitative value of the sport and strengthen the case for funding and partnerships. It would also highlight the wider societal and economic benefits of investing in adaptive sports, reinforcing its importance and potential for growth.

8. Work Project Limitations

A key challenge in this thesis was the lack of comprehensive data on amputee football in Ukraine. As a niche sport, it is underrepresented in mainstream repositories, with limited insights on participants and clubs. The ongoing conflict and socio-economic challenges further compounded data accessibility. Organizations involved lacked centralized records and resource constraints hindered primary data collection. Despite efforts through interviews and secondary research, these limitations impacted the analysis's depth. This highlights the need for systematic data collection and sharing in disability sports to monitor participation, optimize funding and share best practices, ultimately driving sustainable growth and advocacy.

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Figures

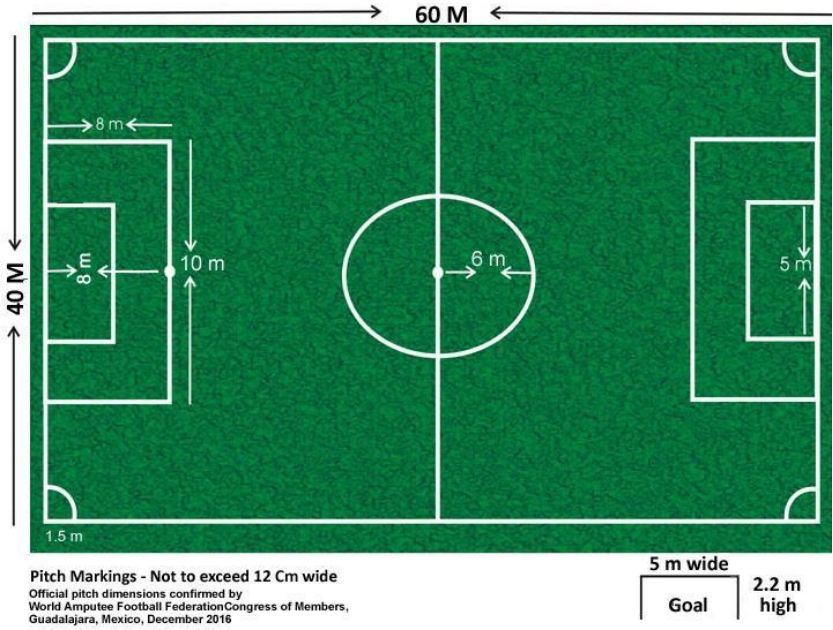


Figure 1: Pitch Dimensions and Markings – WAFF Laws and Rules Governing



Figure 2: Strategic Framework for Amputee Football Development

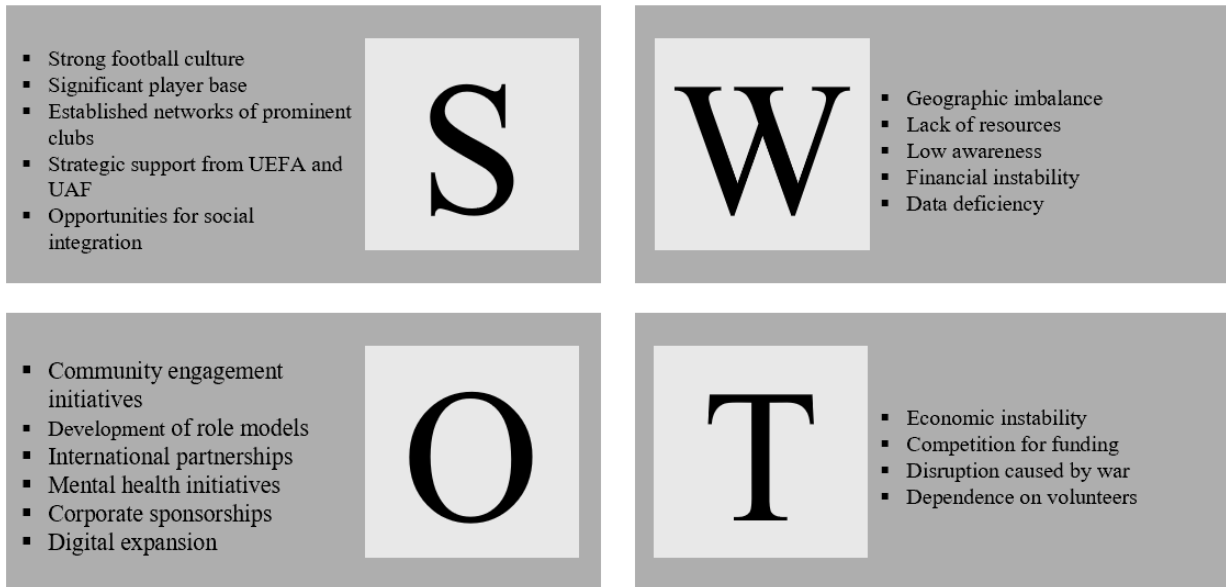


Figure 3: SWOT-Analysis for Amputee Football in Ukraine

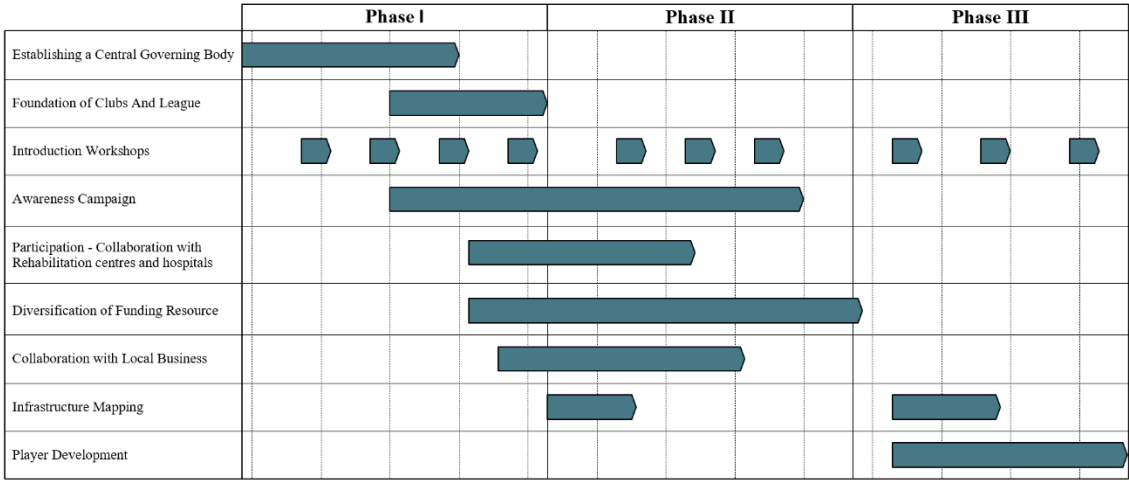


Figure 4: Roadmap

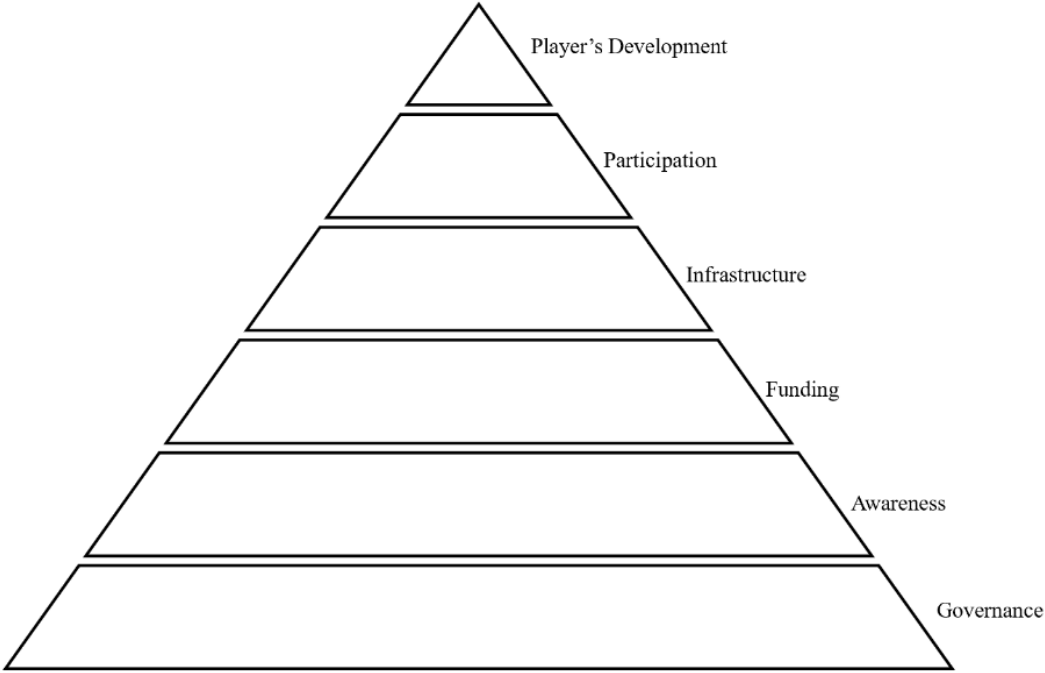


Figure 5: Prioritization of the Pillars

Visual and Digital Resources

Videos

Brighton & Hove Albion Foundation Award: Charlie Hewson
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Buti38rz6S8>

EAFF junior Camp 2022
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iL18FDF_vQU

Introducing amputee football in Palestine
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dWfLcMlrNUU>

Marcin Oleksy Goal vs Stal Rzeszow | FIFA Puskas Award 2022 Winner
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XNJhcsMfWeg>

Türkiye 2-1 England | EXTENDED HIGHLIGHTS | European Amputee Football Championship Final
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ChenbHMaYkA>

World Amputee Football Federation - together anything is possible!
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AiJ8T5xIYsw>

Websites

European Amputee Football Federation
<https://amputeefootball.eu/>

League Of Mighty
<https://ampfootball.uaf.ua/>

Superhuman Rehabilitation centre
<https://superhumans.com/en/>

Unbroken Rehabilitation centre
<https://unbroken.org.ua/>

World Amputee Football Federation
<https://www.worldamputeefootball.org/>

WORLD HEALTH ORGANISATION QUALITY OF LIFE WHOQOL- BREF
<https://www.wasog.org/dynamic/media/78/documents/whoqolBREFuk.pdf>

Images



Simon Baker playing alongside Irish Football Legend Robbie Keane in an exhibition match in December 2016, Photo by Piaras Ó Midheach/Sportsfile



Women's Ukraine amputee football team at the Women's Amputee Football World Cup in Barranquilla, Colombia, in November 2024, UAF Website, <https://uaf.ua/en/article/52712>



Men's Ukraine Amputee Football Team Ukraine finishes 11th in EURO 2024 Amputee Football Championship, held in Evian, France, UAF Website, <https://uaf.ua/en/article/51540>



"League of the Strong": UAF launches social project to develop amputee football in Ukraine. Photo by Andriy Yushchak, <https://uaf.ua/en/article/52686>



League of Mighty Logo, <https://ampfootball.uaf.ua/>

Testimonial from the Partners

Eric and Nils have provided a phenomenal level of support directly to the Ukrainian Association of Football (UAF) through this project. It has been a pleasure to collaborate with them both with their strategic approach to gathering, analysing, interpreting and presenting the variety of insight that was generated - which provided a clear strategy as to how UAF can be advancing their efforts for their amputee programme for many years to come. Despite this being a new area of research for both Eric and Nils, the systematic stages they went through to cover all aspects of the work was great to see and it was a delight to have them also presenting their findings in person to the UAF team which helped celebrate the great support they have provided.

Phil Taylor, UEFA GROW Mentor

Interviews

Name	Position	Pages
Kosta Iliev	Sports Director FIBA	46-49
Philipp Broom	Lead in Disability Football at Brighton & Hove Albion Foundation	50-56
Simon Baker	Former Secretary General WAFF	57-68
Nick Sore	Senior Refugee Sport Coordination at UNHCR	69-73
Charles Tiné	Founder of The Small Projects Team (NGO)	74-78
Christian Heintz	Managing Director German Amputee football	79-82
Mateusz Widlak	President of the WAFF	83-89

Kosta Iliev – Sports Director in charge of Wheelchair Basketball at FIBA

Introduction and Personal Journey

1. *Could you share a bit about your journey with FIBA and your role in the development of wheelchair basketball?*

I have had the privilege of working with FIBA since 2011, combining my passion for basketball with my professional career. Before joining FIBA, I spent about 15 years as a professional basketball player. In 2017, I became part of the Wheelchair Basketball department, which was originally based in the UK. However, in 2010, we made the decision to relocate the department to the House of Basketball in Mies, Switzerland. We wanted to send the message that wheelchair basketball is part of the House of Basketball!

Jorge Garbajosa, FIBA's Vice President, has been a strong advocate for wheelchair basketball, recognizing the sport's immense potential. We maintain a close partnership with the International Wheelchair Basketball Federation (IWBF), as we believe wheelchair basketball is an integral part of the global basketball community. Our goal is to grow the sport together and strengthen its presence worldwide.

Development and Growth of Disabled Sports

2. *From your experience in wheelchair basketball, what key strategies or pillars have been most effective in boosting the growth of disabled sports?*

In my experience, the most effective approach to driving the growth of disabled sports has been through strategic marketing, promoting the sport, and introducing innovative formats. One such initiative was the introduction of 3x3 basketball, which featured in the Olympics. The Paralympic Games also provided a significant boost in visibility, with many matches played to full capacity in the 12,000-seat arena in Bercy. A key strategy for raising awareness was incorporating 3x3 basketball and 3x3 wheelchair basketball into multisport events. This format not only attracted new audiences but also showcased the excitement and inclusivity of the sport on a global stage.

- 3. What challenges did FIBA and the International Wheelchair Committee face in establishing wheelchair basketball as a competitive sport, and how did you overcome them?*

The challenges we faced in establishing the sport included financing the specialized wheelchairs, which are costly, arranging travel for the athletes, and finding the necessary resources to develop the game. We also encountered cultural differences between Western and Eastern Europe, with the East being slower to introduce disabled sports, which presented some hurdles. Despite this, we see huge potential in 3x3 wheelchair basketball, which we've developed across three levels of competition in Europe. The Commonwealth Games also played a key role in giving us the platform to showcase the sport at an international level, further boosting its visibility and growth. One notable achievement was our participation in the Euro Championships, held in Vienna in a 4,000-capacity stadium.

- 4. In your view, what are the key factors that help a country successfully develop a sustainable disabled sports ecosystem like wheelchair basketball in conflict regions, such as Ukraine?*

The Ukraine Basketball Association and FIBA have maintained close contact over the past few years. The President of the Ukraine Basketball Association approached FIBA with the understanding that, due to the war, there will be a significant increase in people with disabilities, making their integration into society through sports a priority. He has shown great enthusiasm, recognizing the growing demand for wheelchair basketball. As a businessman, he is proactively preparing for this need by increasing the production of wheelchairs.

The European Union currently has a collaborative plan with FIBA aimed at developing wheelchair basketball in Armenia, Bulgaria, and Ukraine. This initiative focuses on improving coaching and building the necessary infrastructure for the sport. One of the key factors in securing this collaboration is the fact that Bulgaria is a member of the EU, which helps facilitate access to resources and funding. I believe these partnerships are essential for creating a sustainable ecosystem for wheelchair basketball, allowing the sport to grow and thrive in these regions. By providing improved resources and support, wheelchair basketball can become more accessible, integrating seamlessly into local communities and fostering long-term development.

- 5. What has been FIBA's and International Wheelchair Basketball Federation approach to developing training programs and coaching for wheelchair basketball?*

FIBA approaches wheelchair basketball with a clear understanding that the coaching methods, training sessions, and strategies differ significantly from those in traditional basketball. Recognizing these unique aspects, FIBA focuses on developing specific elements of the sport to ensure proper growth. For instance, FIBA has launched initiatives in South Africa, organizing events that offer specialized coaching programs and seminars on Wheelchair Basketball. These events are essential for expanding the knowledge and understanding of wheelchair basketball on a global scale, helping to nurture the sport's development worldwide.

Visibility and Promotion

- 6. What strategies have been most effective in increasing the visibility and media coverage of wheelchair basketball?*

We have a strong partnership between FIBA and the International Wheelchair Basketball Federation. Additionally, we are working on several collaborative marketing initiatives, tapping

into numerous opportunities across TV, social media. However, I am no expert in this regard and cannot give you specific information.

Infrastructure and Funding

7. What infrastructure or resources were critical to the initial development of wheelchair basketball?

We still support the International Wheelchair Basketball Federation particularly for costs like travel for referees. The most expensive aspect of wheelchair basketball for players, however, is the wheelchairs themselves. Last year, we also introduced a global insurance plan for all wheelchair basketball players. While the NBA has significant financial resources, our goal was to ensure that the entire basketball family is protected by offering global insurance coverage for players as well. Moreover, we strongly believe in the potential of 3x3 basketball, as it presents numerous opportunities. The game is fast paced, highly competitive, and attracts enthusiastic viewers. Our next goal is to have 3x3 basketball included in the Paralympics, and we believe that once this happens, the possibilities for growth and development are endless.

Regarding infrastructure, we have a team of venue specialists who focus on consulting various associations. With their expertise in this field, they provide valuable guidance and support on infrastructure-related matters to help associations optimize. Obviously, this is easier to achieve in Europe, where there are more opportunities and better infrastructure. However, we face greater challenges in regions like Africa, where the infrastructure is not as developed.

8. How does FIBA successfully secure funding and sponsorships for wheelchair basketball?

We manage this internally in close collaboration with the Wheelchair Basketball Association. One of our key initiatives was securing sponsorships to provide referee kits, with our kit sponsor explicitly covering wheelchair basketball. Last year, we also brought on a dedicated sponsor, a watchmaker, specifically for wheelchair basketball. We see this as a fantastic opportunity for companies. Our goal is twofold: to demonstrate that wheelchair basketball is an exciting, engaging sport that attracts viewers, and to emphasize the social responsibility aspect, which offers significant value to businesses."

9. What are the best ways to recruit new players for wheelchair basketball, especially in communities with limited access to adaptive sports?

I understand that many associations collaborate with hospitals to recruit new players and help reintegrate them into the community both socially and through sports. Currently, social media offers a lot of opportunities for us. By regularly posting about wheelchair basketball, people are more likely to be exposed to it, increasing the chances of them wanting to participate. Through cross-marketing efforts with FIBA, we can reach a wider audience for wheelchair basketball, helping to make them part of the basketball community.

10. How do you support young wheelchair basketball players, and what key steps are involved?

We have U23 and U25 teams in place to help young players transition more smoothly into the senior teams. This setup allows them to receive the necessary training and experience to advance to the next level.

11. What does FIBA do to keep wheelchair basketball players involved from beginner to competitive levels?

Basketball is a sport that can be played across different age groups. We start with youth teams, then adult teams, and we also have systems in place for players in the 30-40 age bracket, providing them with competitive opportunities. Our belief is that offering structured competition motivates people to participate and stay engaged.

Future Outlook

12. What advice would you give to those working to establish and grow amputee football in such challenging environments?

I think it's important to have a lot of synergies, and it's essential that disabled sports are integrated into national federations. This would create more opportunities for those involved within the national structure, and bringing passionate individuals into the organisation can only benefit the growth of both wheelchair basketball and disability sports in general. Their involvement would help to develop these sports and extend their reach.

Philip Broom - Lead in Disability Football at Brighton & Hove Albion Foundation*Introduction and Personal Journey*

1. *Could you share a bit about your journey with Brighton & Hove Albion? What initially drew you to work in the field of disability sports?*

I'm Phil Broom, and I've been involved in disability football for nearly 15 years now. I work for Brighton & Hove Albion Foundation, where I oversee our disability teams, including amputee, cerebral palsy, blind, and power chair football teams. I'm also a talent consultant for the England FA, covering the South of England. In that role, I help young players with disabilities who want to make it to the national teams.

My journey into this field started during university, where I had to do a volunteer placement. I got involved with disability football and fell in love with it. From there, I took over as a coach, and 15 years later, I'm running a program that now includes 700 players, 25 community coaches, and 5 full-time staff members.

Our approach is all about inclusion. We run pan-disability football sessions where players with various disabilities—whether they have autism, are blind, or have learning disabilities—can play together. We also offer specific sessions tailored to different disabilities, like sessions just for players with autism or for those in power chairs. The idea is to create a space where these players can enjoy the game, make friends, and develop skills at their own pace, without the pressure of competition.

In mainstream football, there's often a big focus on winning, and players with disabilities might end up on the bench or not getting much game time. We're trying to change that by making sure everyone feels appreciated and gets the chance to play. It's about building confidence, friendships, and developing soft skills, more than just focusing on winning.

Development of Disability Football

2. *How did Brighton & Hove Albion FC develop its disability football program?*

It all started with just one disability football session in Brighton, and from there it's grown and grown. To expand, you need support—whether it's from the football club, county councils, or local community backing you with funding to run more sessions.

But the key moment was that first session. Why? Because from that one event, you get a social media post, people start talking, and special needs schools take notice. That creates awareness, and from there, things start to build. You can then introduce inclusive football or disability-specific sessions, but it all hinges on the success of that initial session.

So, what does success look like? It's not about having 1,000 people show up—it's about the one, two, three, or four participants you get and building up slowly from there. Patience is crucial in disability football, as growth comes step by step.

3. *What is your main goal in running a disability football programme?*

The main goal is to increase participation and reach all the children who love football but don't have a space to play because mainstream football is too competitive. We want to reach as many

people as possible, but it's not just about numbers. Developing social skills is equally important. Look at what happened during COVID—kids weren't communicating, spending too much time on their Xbox or PlayStation. Our sessions help them reconnect, communicate, build friendships, and, most importantly, create a sense of belonging.

That sense of belonging is huge. When everyone wears the same kit, it creates an instant connection. Even if a child has autism or another child is non-verbal, they can still feel part of something bigger just by sharing that same kit. It's a powerful way to bring people together, and the impact can be truly amazing.

- 4. How many players with disability are there in the programme in total and how many players do you have in the Brighton Amputee F.C?*

We've probably got around 12 to 14 amputee football players currently. It's definitely a small number. In the 15 years I've been here, we've only had about 20 players in the program overall. It's a small group, but that's just how it is.

- 5. What are some best practices for developing amputee football that you've seen or implemented in Brighton?*

The key is getting people interested and talking about disability football. The more people involved, the more opportunities we can create—whether it's more coaches, teams, or sessions. But to make that happen, you need proper funding, suitable venues, and, most importantly, skilled coaches. It's not like mainstream football, where any volunteer can step in.

I don't believe a volunteer dad can just show up and run a session because it could have a negative impact. You need professionals who understand disabilities and know how to engage with these players. While volunteers with the right mindset and training can be great, it's crucial that the people running these sessions have the knowledge and experience to support players with disabilities and get them playing in a positive and inclusive way.

- 6. How do you tailor football programs to accommodate different levels of ability and disability?*

A great example of this is wheelchair and power chair football. I feel like anyone can coach it, but many people are nervous about it because there are extra aspects to consider. However, I believe anyone can do it—they just need to come along and observe a session. They're not expected to coach right away, just to meet the players and see how things run. Once they do that, they start watching the other coaches, learning from them, and before they know it, they're stepping into the role of assistant coach. It can be really powerful.

Another important aspect is that many of our coaches at Brighton have disabilities themselves. For example, in our autism sessions, one of our coaches has autism. In our cerebral palsy sessions, one of our coaches has cerebral palsy. It's the same for mental well-being, partially sighted, and power chair football—we're actively working to increase the number of coaches with disabilities. It's fantastic for the players to have role models they can relate to, and it's a great way to give back to the community. Our coaches love it, and it also provides employment opportunities for those who may struggle to find jobs elsewhere.

- 7. Does your amputee team play at amateur level or in a competition?*

A few years ago, amputee football in England had a successful league with 11-12 teams, including Brighton. We played against big teams like Chelsea, Arsenal, Everton, and Liverpool. But one decision changed everything—requiring players to use two crutches—which drastically reduced participation. Many players, including those with different types of amputations or without arms, couldn't meet this requirement. As a result, the league now only has three teams—Everton, Chelsea, and Portsmouth.

At Brighton, we no longer compete in the National League but play against other teams in friendly matches. We train every Monday with about 11-15 amputee players, who also participate in pan-disability football. Some of our players want to compete at the national level, but it's tough because of the crutch rule.

If you're looking to set something up, I'd recommend creating two groups: one for those who can play by the strict rules (using two crutches) and another for those who can't but still want to play. That way, everyone gets a chance to compete without being excluded due to their specific circumstances. There used to be a "three-touch" rule, where players could only touch the ball three times before releasing it, to ensure fair play and give everyone a chance. This kind of flexibility can really make a difference in growing the sport.

8. *Do you use any performance indicators to measure the impact of your program?*

We've been keeping participation records for the past 6-7 years, and tracking numbers in amputee football but it's hard to keep the numbers up for a few reasons. It's hard to attract players, and even harder to keep them involved, especially as they get older. Some players have had to stop because the strain on their legs makes recovery too difficult. For some, it takes days to recover after a single game, and that affects their work, family life, and daily responsibilities. Two players recently had to leave for this reason.

That's why I always emphasize that getting involved isn't just about playing football. While football is the goal, the social aspect is just as important—if not more. The mental well-being benefits of simply being part of the group are huge. When someone new reaches out and says, "I'm an amputee, but I'm new to the game," the response should always be, "Yes, come along!" Even if they don't play, they can still be involved socially, or help with other roles—coaching, refereeing, organizing, or even something as simple as filling water bottles. It's about creating a community and giving people multiple ways to participate, not just on the pitch.

Awareness and Participation

9. *What media strategies have been most effective in boosting the visibility of disability sports?*

The best way to raise awareness is through a video we recently made of one of our players who won the Foundation Player of the Year—Charlie Hewson. It's incredibly impactful. Charlie lost his leg as a child, and the video shows his whole journey. At just 14, I truly believe he could become one of the best amputee footballers in the world. He's absolutely incredible.

That video has the potential to ripple across the country. It even got the attention of the Brighton first team, who invited us to their training session to meet the manager and players after seeing it. One powerful video can have a massive impact on participation. You can do flyers, letters, school visits, and assemblies, but seeing an amputee player in action has an unmatched effect.

People share it, it goes viral, and suddenly, awareness of the sport and our sessions at Brighton grows exponentially. That's the kind of impact we're looking for—something that really resonates and inspires people to get involved.

10. How do you attract and retain participants in your disability football programs, especially from under-represented groups?

Another thing we do is collaborate closely with the Sussex Rehabilitation Centre, where people go to get their prosthetics and limbs sorted. We've built a great relationship with them, so we regularly visit and hold taster football sessions. We put up posters, and even the staff at the front desk know us. When a new amputee comes in, like someone who has just lost their leg and might be struggling or in need of social support, they'll pass along information about our sessions. This connection has been a great link for us, and most of our players come from the Sussex Rehabilitation Centre or England Amputee Football.

England Amputee Football is run by a volunteer organization separate from the FA, which can be a bit confusing. They have men's and women's teams that compete globally, but unlike other disability sports like partially sighted, deaf, power chair, or cerebral palsy football, amputee football isn't officially part of the FA. If they were, I think it would make a huge difference. Working with the FA, I've seen how they support other teams with stipends to cover costs like travel to Saint George's Park, where the England first team trains. Unfortunately, amputee football doesn't have the same resources, and they train in far less ideal conditions due to the lack of FA support. It would be great to see that change

Infrastructure

11. What are the key infrastructural elements necessary for running a successful disability football program?

The key to a successful amputee football session is the environment. You need to think about where the session is held—whether it's an indoor or outdoor venue—and who else is on the pitch at the same time. Different times of the year bring different weather conditions, so it's important to make sure the environment is right for the players. If an amputee arrives and there's a mainstream football session going on nearby, it can be off-putting. It's crucial to have the entire pitch booked and create a welcoming space with diverse coaches—male, female, different coaching styles—all contributing to the atmosphere.

You want a relaxed start to the session, especially for new players, and then increase the intensity as they get more comfortable. There are often two types of players: those who want to compete and those who are there to improve their skills and enjoy the game. It's important to cater to both.

If only one or two players show up at first, the key is consistency. Will they come back next week? You need to create a long-term program that will grow over time. In amateur football, especially in England, you might not get big numbers initially—five players might be considered a success. But if you get the environment right, the players will come, and the program will grow.

12. How do you adapt existing football facilities to accommodate the needs of disabled athletes?

No, we don't really adapt the game much—football is football. It may sound funny, but once the ball comes out and players start passing it around, it all falls into place. You can't change the

essence of the game; a match is still a match. Sure, you might need to be a bit more patient or flexible, but that's something you'd do in mainstream football too. From the outside, it might look different, but when you're actually on the pitch, it's really not that different at all.

For us, it's important that every player, whether they have a disability, an amputation, or a learning challenge, comes to our sessions as just football players. They don't come as "disabled" or "amputee" football players—they're just players, like anyone else, here to enjoy the game. It's about keeping it simple: they show up, play football, and enjoy the social and mental benefits that come with it. Football is a universal language, and it's the same for everyone, no matter who they are.

13. What special training do coaches need to work with disabled athletes, and how do you ensure they are well-equipped to handle diverse abilities?

Many of our coaches, especially those with disabilities, have been part of our program for a while and already have a good understanding of how the sessions run. Before stepping into a coaching role, they go through some essential qualifications. They start with an introduction to football coaching and can progress through levels like Level 2, UEFA B, and even UEFA A, depending on how far they want to go in their coaching journey. Alongside their coaching qualifications, they also receive training in safeguarding and first aid, so they know how to deal with both medical issues and safeguarding concerns.

Most of our coaches begin as volunteers. They don't jump straight into leading sessions; instead, they spend 4-6 weeks observing and learning how everything works—from setting up drills to managing the players. After this observation period, they take on a trial session with supervision to get hands-on experience. Then, they work closely with an experienced coach, like myself, to refine their skills and build confidence. Only when they feel ready do they start leading their own sessions.

This step-by-step approach ensures they are fully prepared, not just in terms of coaching techniques, but also in understanding the unique needs of players with disabilities. It allows them to develop their own coaching style while upholding the inclusive and supportive environment we strive for in our sessions.

Funding

14. If not confidential: what is your annual budget for running the disability program /an amputee football Team?

In terms of disability football, we deal with a relatively large sum of money just to cover basic costs. We've got five full-time staff members, 25 community coaches, and multiple venues to manage. We need to bring in around £300,000 annually to keep everything running. We get that from the Premier League, county councils, and sponsors, but interestingly, we don't get direct funding from the football club itself. Brighton Football Club supports us by providing free venues, but they don't contribute financially. If they did, things would be a lot easier.

Sponsorships are helpful, but sponsors usually want their branding on the kit, which we can't allow since we're playing as Brighton. The club supports us by covering venue costs, but we still have to pay coaches, around £20 an hour for lead coaches, and cover other expenses.

Running the amputee team specifically isn't too expensive because the venue is free, and we're mainly paying the coaches. However, there's the bigger picture to consider—full-time staff, management, safeguarding, and data fees. So while the sessions themselves aren't costly, the infrastructure surrounding them is where the real expenses come in.

15. What advice would you give to an organization trying to secure funding for disability football in a developing or conflict-affected region like Ukraine?

It's a tough question, but the key is getting people interested. If you can get people excited about the cause, especially those who have the resources, they'll invest and support it. Sometimes, all you need is one or two people with money willing to back it. This could even come from a professional connection. Look at the Turkish amputee football league—England played Turkey in front of 60,000 fans! So, raising awareness and getting people talking about the sport is crucial, and the funding will follow.

Start small, with fundraisers or campaigns. People will invest and fundraise if they see the potential. Take, for example, the England women's amateur team—they're currently raising £50,000 to go to the World Cup in Colombia. Two of our players, including a goalkeeper, are heading there with them. Ideally, it shouldn't have to be this way. The FA could support programs like this if the volunteer system wasn't as prominent, but until then, it's about raising awareness and getting the right people involved.

Future Outlook

16. What advice would you give to those working to establish and grow amputee football in such challenging environments?

What I've learned is that one successful session can make all the difference. If the environment is right, the coaches are skilled, and everything is well-organized, people will travel to be part of it. Trying to immediately set up 25 sessions all over Ukraine or in any large area won't work if the quality isn't there. But if you focus on one really great session, or maybe a handful of well-executed ones, that's where you'll see real progress. Doing lots of small, average sessions will spread your resources too thin, and you won't get the results you're aiming for.

The idea is to start with one session and do it exceptionally well. Provide everything needed—kits, boots, quality equipment—so that players feel supported and taken care of. Make it a standout experience. Once you have that one strong foundation, everything else can grow from there. You can organize friendly matches, get people watching, and even aim to hold events in proper stadiums to elevate the experience.

Even something like getting the players to walk around at halftime during a big match can raise awareness and generate interest. The more visibility and professionalism you can bring to that one session, the better. It's about building something solid first—doing that one thing really well—and then you can expand. People will notice, and the word will spread, but it all starts with getting that first step right.

17. Is there any potential in an experience exchange? Helping with coach training, organizing training camps with UAF?

I personally haven't done this through disability football, but we've handled it internally through our football club. For example, when F.A.'s or players are interested in an exchange, I would tell

them to contact me on what is called the Para hub. I will invite them and say, "Come and see our sessions, see the good practices we're using." I think we're doing well, but football is full of opinions—some people might agree, some might not. I always encourage people to watch, make up their own minds, and take back any ideas to their own programs.

We haven't done much internationally on the disability side yet. I know our mainstream football pathway has had exchanges with countries like China or Japan recently, with their children coming here to participate in football camps.

We'd be more than willing to collaborate on something similar if the opportunity arises. Whether that means I travel out or you guys come here, we'd be happy to explore it. Of course, I'd have to check with the club and the foundation, but we're open to the idea.

Simon Baker - Former WAFF Secretary General*Introduction and Personal Journey*

1. *Can you share your personal journey with amputee football? What motivated you to get involved in this field?*

I'm Simon Baker, originally from Limerick, Ireland, and for the past 15 years, I've been working in amputee football, not just in Ireland but across the world. I lost my leg in a construction accident, and that changed everything for me. Mentally, it was tough. I struggled with daily life and didn't want to be seen as disabled. When people tried to help, I'd snap at them, thinking they saw me as weak. But over time, I realized it wasn't them—it was me. I saw myself as disabled, and I thought that's what everyone else saw too. Once I changed how I looked at myself, everything shifted.

Before my accident, I worked in Germany as a plasterer for about ten years. I had my own business and loved it. But after losing my leg, everything was different. I even applied for a job I was overqualified for, but they wouldn't hire me due to liability issues. That rejection hit hard. It sent me into a deep depression. I even tried to drive my car into a wall at 100 miles an hour. I survived, and something in me clicked. I knew I had to change my life, and I decided to do it through sport.

Sport became my medicine. I trained for the Dublin Marathon, ran it on crutches, and finished in five and a half hours. It wasn't about setting records; it was about finding a way forward. I started running 10km races on crutches, and it opened a whole new world for me. But as my surgeon said, I had to be careful with my good leg, so I started looking for something else. That's when I found football. I wasn't a football guy before, but it was a perfect fit—no need for expensive prosthetics, just a ball and a set of crutches, and I could play. So, I suppose what I did is I looked for another sport. I found football. I was never really a soccer. I was never really a soccer player or interested in football. But I realized that I could find other like-minded people like me who maybe couldn't afford the Autobot which cost 30, 40, 50,000 euro. But with a set of crutches, you know, for maybe €50, I can go out and run, and I'm active. And that's why I started. Then I started the Irish amputee football. That's how Irish Amputee Football was born.

Eventually, with Mateusz Widłak, we took it further, founding the European Amputee Football Federation, and brought it to UEFA's social responsibility programs. But here's the thing—I never saw amputee football as a "social responsibility" case. I didn't want people to pity us. It's football, plain and simple. That's how I've always approached it, even when I worked in places like Gaza, Rwanda, and South Sudan with the International Committee of the Red Cross. Life is tough everywhere. Losing a leg doesn't make you special—it makes you a person facing challenges like everyone else. These players didn't need sympathy—they wanted respect as athletes.

In places like South Sudan, where people survive on less than \$1 a day, amputee football wasn't about highlighting how hard life was—it was about giving people pride through sport. I always told my team, the only difference between us and the able-bodied players is we play on crutches, they play on two legs. That's it. In fact, I used to joke with pros like Robbie Keane, saying I could do some of what Ronaldo can do, but Ronaldo couldn't do what I could on crutches.

When you're promoting amputee football in Ukraine, don't focus on the struggles these guys have been through. Everyone knows life is tough for them—what they need is recognition as footballers. Let people see what they can do on the pitch. Trust me, it speaks for itself. I've seen it time and time again people are blown away by amputee football because most of them have been on

crutches at some point, and they know how hard it is just to walk. When they see someone sprinting on crutches and playing football, it changes perceptions.

In Ukraine, there's already a foundation for amputee football, and Mateusz has been helping develop their women's team too. He's a key figure to work with. But remember, this is about football—not disability. Let the sport do the talking. These players don't want to be seen as "special cases"—they want to be seen as athletes.

The first thing I'd do in any country is look at the governance structure. Who's the chairman, the president, the secretary, the treasurer? It's important to know who's running the show because any association is only as good as the people in the boardroom. If the foundation—the committee—is solid, that's a great start. So, I always ask the president, "What's your role? What qualifies you for it?" Passion alone isn't enough. You can't just be in that position because no one else wanted it.

Good governance is key. It has to be clear, transparent, and open. The committee should have defined goals and realistic objectives. It's not enough to just say, "We have 80 players now, and we want 1,000." You need a clear plan—how are you going to get to that 1,000? Set KPIs, review them regularly, and hold everyone accountable. Progress doesn't mean you have to hit every target, but you should be moving towards those goals. In the end, development depends on having a strong governance structure in place.

Awareness

2. *How did you initially get people interested in amputee football, both players and the broader community?*

In Ireland, it was hard to find players for amputee football because we don't have wars—we're friendly with everyone. Most of our players were from accidents, like road traffic or other incidents. But when I went to Gaza, I had 110 players, and 80 of them were shot during the marches by Israeli forces. In South Sudan, it was even more challenging because it's so spread out, but we had 40-50 players in Juba, most from road accidents or diabetes. The point is, every country has different needs and challenges, and it's about adapting to those.

In Ireland, people didn't know what amputee football was. I'd tell them, and they'd assume it was amputees playing with prosthetics. I had to educate them. The best way to do that is through an upbeat promotional video. It's about showing what the sport is without turning it into a human-interest story. I always insisted that amputee football appear on the sports pages, not buried as a feel-good piece on page five. We wear our country's badge with pride, and we're a professional football team, not a charity case.

In Ukraine, for instance, people are already going through so much. They don't need more reminders of hardship. When you promote amputee football, focus on the sport, not the tragedy. Show people what these athletes can do without hammering them over the head with how hard their lives are. If you keep focusing on how tough things are for amputees, it can backfire. People with their own struggles might feel worse about themselves, thinking, *If this guy with one leg can do all this, what's wrong with me?* It's all about balance. Amputee football is inspiring by itself—no need for extra commentary.

When I was in Gaza and South Sudan, it was the same story. People have their own problems, and they don't want to hear another sad tale. Just show them the sport, add some upbeat music, and they'll be inspired on their own. Mateusz Widlak and I worked hard to change the face of amputee

football in Europe, focusing on making it part of the national football system. We always aimed to have the amputee team treated with the same respect as the national team.

Another thing—politicians love to get involved once the sport gains traction, but they're hard to pin down for support at the start. When I went to South Sudan and Gaza, I met with ministers who said all the right things, but until you create something truly amazing, they won't give you money. Once the sport gains visibility, then everyone wants to take credit. So, my approach was to build something great first, then ask for support.

It's also important to find a good ambassador—someone well-known who can help bridge the gap between able-bodied football and amputee football. If you can pair a Ukrainian football star with an amputee player, that's a brilliant way to connect with the public.

To get the word out, sometimes the simplest way works best. Go to the local park, set up a pop-up pitch, and let people see the sport firsthand. When I arrived in South Sudan, we set up a training session next to a regular football game, and soon enough, 300 people gathered around, filming and sharing it themselves. The sport promotes itself when people see it.

Finally, work with local prosthetic clinics or organizations like Ottobock to get involved. You'll find plenty of players—there's never a shortage. It's about creating something that people want to be part of, not just for the sport, but for the pride and the community it builds.

3. *What strategies helped grow amputee football in Ireland and Europe, and why do you think has Turkey excelled so much in developing their programs?*

It all starts with strong governance. If you have solid governance in place, then you can build good structures. From there, you'll develop a positive public image and have a strong foundation for success. A proper development program is key to making football accessible at all levels. It's not just about playing internationally, but about creating opportunities within the country.

For any football club to thrive, you need a grassroots approach. That means having a children's section, a development pathway for kids to come up through the ranks. Take England's amputee football as an example. They've been very successful because they started a junior program in 2016, and now 90% of their national team players came through that program. That's what a good development structure looks like.

It's also about community. Football isn't just for the men—it's for the wives, families, and friends. Everyone is involved. The wives are part of the club, they help out by socializing, making food, and offering support. It becomes a social hub, and when you make it regional, the whole community gets engaged. You start with junior programs, then girls' programs, local leagues, and from there you build up to the international level. But none of that happens without regular playing opportunities and strong organizational structures.

Of course, you'll need funding, but to get that, you need a clear, structured plan. Sponsors won't hand over money unless you show them exactly what you need and how you plan to use it. And remember, it's not always about the money. Sometimes it's about getting things in kind. You could get a sports company to sponsor the footballs, another company to provide water for half-time, or even local businesses to help with accommodation or food. It's about being creative and finding partners willing to contribute in different ways.

When you have the right governance, structures, and community involvement, everything else falls into place. That's how you build a successful football program.

4. *Is there a website, where we can find data on which countries have an amputee football league or number of clubs?*

In a country like Ireland, we don't have many amputees, so finding players is tough. Right now, there are only three amputee football clubs, and the big issue is that everyone has to travel. What clubs do is set up a league format, and if you can put together four teams, for example, you run a two-day event. Each team plays two games one day and two games the next. This way, no one must travel too far, and it's easier to manage.

For Ukraine, you could do something similar. Find a celebratory event, something that's already getting attention, and run a two-day tournament around it. You "gate crash" the event, make it a highlight, and get people watching. The media, TV, and others will pick it up, and that's how you get the word out there and grow the sport.

Look at Mateusz in Poland—he's got a really good system. His players are treated like pros, and in countries like Turkey, the players get paid to play. Some countries are paying players from other countries to join their league, like Poland. The key is getting the structure and visibility right, and the rest follows.

I set up the European Amputee Football Champions League back in 20-whatever, and the goal was to model it after regular international FA leagues. We knew we couldn't do everything the same, but we aimed to be as professional as possible. When I was in Gaza, for instance, people would tell me, "Simon, you're too stiff, too strict." But I'd tell the players, *stand up straight, the media's here, come onto the pitch like professionals*. It's not just about the game—it's a theatrical show from the moment they step on the field. The warm-up, the way they carry themselves—it all matters because it sends a message that we're serious.

That's what I've always pushed for, and it's what we're aiming for in Ukraine too. The European Amputee Football Federation has become very professional, but there's still a lack of solid data we can analyze, and that's a challenge for your Ukrainian project. But Ukraine has a unique advantage—because of the war, there will be funding, and sadly, there will be amputees. So, the most important thing you can do is make sure the governance, leadership, and structures are strong. That's the foundation for success.

When Mateusz and I set up European Amputee Football, we looked at the world amputee football scene, and it was a mess. The structure was weak, the organization was poor, and the public image wasn't great. Instead of constantly criticizing, we decided to lead by example. We set up regular committee meetings, developed proper structures, and put everything in place to be taken seriously. Then we launched the Champions League. At the time, there were only four or five teams with leagues in Europe. Now, almost every country has a league, even if it's just three or four teams.

We also introduced junior amputee football because we knew the future depended on developing the next generation. If we invest in the kids, the sport will grow. Just before I left the World Amputee Football Federation, I realized there were women's teams out there, so I helped set up a strategic plan for the development of women's amputee football. Now, two years later, there's going to be the first Women's Amputee Football World Cup this November. Two years ago, no one was even talking about women's amputee football!

The vision has always been to make amputee football as close to UEFA and FIFA standards as possible. If we don't, no one will take us seriously. I always say, we want people to look at what we're doing and say, *wow*, not pat us on the head and say, *oh, you're doing great for what you are*. We want respect, not pity. That's how we push the sport forward. I can guarantee you UEFA will want to see grassroots football. They will want to see junior camps that are training days, women's training. They will want to see club football. They're not interested in international. You know, what they want to see is there's a grassroots development plan.

5. *How do you build grassroots programs to nurture young players in amputee football, and what are the critical steps?*

It's a big thing, because I remember when I first started, and I went to Mateusz and I said, I'm going to do European amputee football junior camp. We organize this for three days, and each child comes with a parent who is responsible for looking after them. We put all the necessary measures in place, and we made it work. But the one thing I said, I think, for the kids, and I think if you're writing your report for UEFA, when they ask the benefits, it's not just for the athlete. The benefit is going to be for the parents. Now, when I first started in Ireland, junior amputee football, and I was asking kids from six years of age up to take off their legs and run around a football pitch, I can tell you the parents weren't too happy because they'd never seen this and they didn't think. And I said, what's your problem? And they said, oh, if he falls over, he's only one good does this. Okay, so if he falls over, he's going to fall on the grass. He can get back up. What are you going to do? Same.

When I was in Gaza, I said to parents now, bearing in mind in Gaza, they don't understand me. So everything is through a translator. But I think the biggest thing for me and the junior, yes, we're developing, yes, we're developing new players for the future, but we're also educating the parents because as a parent, the first thing they want to do is wrap their kid in cotton wool and they stop them from developing because be careful, you're going to fall. No, no, no, stay here. No, I have to. And the parent, their heart bleeds because they feel so bad for their child with the one leg and they can't. But once they start seeing the kids train, you'd be really surprised. And I think one of the beautiful things for me, especially the young kids, you can see almost the sense of relief in the parent that the child is running, playing, has friends, is normal. And so, I always found that the junior camp was a real education for parents to sit down and discuss.

For instance, if you go to the prosthetic clinic and you're with your mother, you sit, you wait in the queue, you might say hello to someone, you go, you see the doctor, you go home, you don't see any other amputee again. So, even for them to be around other amputees, then what we did is we started some focus groups. So, I would go to certain areas, get some of the amputee football players from their areas. Please come and see. We have some videos; we have some talks. But the first thing I noticed with the parents, one mother, oh, my son, and he has problems. Oh, my son had those problems. And we did this, and we did that and. And before you know it, you've created a social supporting group for each other without them even noticing. And sometimes it's a relief to be around people like yourself. Because you're not standing out, you know, if that makes sense.

Participation and Player Development

6. *How have you developed training programs and coaching for amputee football?*

I get it, and believe it or not, I don't have any coaching qualifications. But I played football for 10 years, and I learned from being told, "Move here, move there, don't do this, don't do that." So, when I go to a new country to coach, I don't lead with qualifications—I lead with passion. I focus on the positives, not the negatives. For me, it's always been about changing people's perceptions and improving the public image of amputee football.

I tell players all the time: this is a theatrical show. Yes, we want to win the World Cup, score goals, and achieve everything on the field. But in the meantime, we have to change how people see us. And that starts with how we present ourselves. I always say, when you walk out of that dressing room, you don't come out with a cigarette in your mouth or a can of Coke in your hand. You come out looking professional, in the zone, just like in the World Cup. It's about showing that you're serious and that this is more than just a game—it's about image.

The same applies to the kids. When they come out smiling, feeling proud, and the parents are beaming, that's a huge part of the message. The public sees that, and they see that this isn't about disability—it's about football, it's about joy, it's about community. Image is everything.

One time, I got pulled aside by the head of communications at the Football Association of Ireland. I was on the 6:00 news, saying that amputee football is one of the fastest-growing sports in the world, and I jokingly said, "We've created something so good, people will start cutting their legs off just to play!" They rang me straight after and said, "Simon, you can't go telling people to cut their legs off to play football, because if someone does, they'll sue us!" And yeah, of course, I get it. But the point I was making is that amputee football is something special, and people with two legs are missing out! It's not me being cocky—it's the pride that comes with the sport. I've run a marathon, I've done 257km in five days on one leg, and I did it because it made me feel good about myself.

At the end of the day, though, without good structure and governance, none of this is sustainable. You can't get financial support without it. You can't build a real program without the right people in the right places. You need leaders who aren't just looking for a business card that says "President"—you need people with real goals, real objectives, who are there to make a difference.

7. What do you think could be a specific structure in the case of the Ukrainian FA for training program for youth players?

For the Ukrainian FA's program, the first step is to establish clear goals and objectives, making sure the people in charge of governance have realistic time frames and are accountable. You need to identify the regions where players are or where clubs could potentially be set up. Since traveling can be an issue, look at setting up two or three areas where you can hold one-day workshops. These workshops should be fun and engaging, but also realistic for players' abilities.

A key part of growing amputee football is connecting with prosthetic clinics, as they have direct access to amputees. You can work with them to organize events like an amputee sports day, using a popular Ukrainian footballer to draw attention and get people involved. Make sure you have the right coaches, physios, and welfare regulations in place, especially for younger players.

Since many of the new players won't be used to moving on crutches, you need a development plan that matches their levels. Cater to their abilities so they don't feel discouraged and quit early on. The workshops should also include promotional elements—videos, interviews with players, and testimonials that show what they've gained from the sport. These should focus on the positives, highlighting the joy and growth from participating, not the hardships.

Each region in Ukraine may have different challenges—whether it's transport, lack of facilities, or funding. You need to adapt to those realities while ensuring that the workshops are fun, physically manageable, and leave players excited to come back.

Videos, as you've already seen in your experience, play a huge role in growing the sport. Spirit-driven, powerful content can drive participation and awareness, much like it has for other programs.

Lastly, make sure these workshops don't just leave players sore and discouraged, but instead excited about the future of the sport and ready to come back for more. That's how you build momentum and a lasting community.

8. *Did you have any performance indicators to measure the impact?*

If you look at our work in Gaza it is tough right now. Everything we worked on for four years is gone. In South Sudan, it's also hard due to financial challenges. You must speak with Mateusz he's already working with the Ukrainian FA and the International Committee of the Red Cross, which has a physical rehabilitation program in Ukraine. That's something you should be looking into because there's a lot of funding available through those programs. Matthias is someone you need to connect with. He's professional, well-organized, and his presentations are always top-notch—very polished. He's a great guy to have on your side for this.

While I'm rougher around the edges, Mateusz brings that structure and professionalism that can really take things to the next level.

9. *Based on your experience, would mixed teams (men and women) be beneficial in development of amputee football?*

At the moment, there's no rule saying a woman can't play on a men's amputee football team. That's actually one of the reasons I made women's amputee football official—there were a lot of women playing in Africa, but they faced serious challenges, especially with funding. The men didn't want to share the limited resources available, and you also have to consider the cultural differences.

For example, we had an American girl play on the Irish team at one point, and while she wasn't the best, she still played. So there's nothing technically stopping a woman from joining a men's team. But I made a conscious decision to separate them. In regional areas or leagues, I don't see an issue with women and men playing together if it helps create more local playing opportunities. It's important to give people a chance to train weekly, not just monthly, so mixed teams can be practical at that level.

However, internationally, I don't think it works, and that's mainly because of cultural differences. Imagine if a team from America, with a woman on their roster, faced Iran—there's no way the Iranian players would agree to play against a woman. Rather than end up in an awkward situation where we'd have to say, "Sorry, you can't play because of cultural restrictions," it's better to keep men and women separate at the international level.

That's why I set up the Women's Amputee Football Federation—to ensure that women have plenty of grassroots opportunities to build their skills, with the ultimate goal of competing at an international level on their own. It's not about being sexist, it's about being realistic and making sure we avoid unnecessary complications, especially at international events. Locally, it's different. At the club or regional level, mixed teams can help grow the sport. But when we step onto the international stage, it's best to keep it separate to avoid any embarrassing situations where women might be excluded.

With the Women's Amputee Football Federation in place and the Women's World Cup coming up, we're already giving women their own space to develop and thrive. That's how I see the best way forward.

10. Would you suggest having one pitch for traditional amputee football, following the official rules, and another pitch for people who, for example, someone might not have an arm and can't use crutches. Essentially, two different setups. Do you agree with that approach?

In England, they have a pan-disability league, and I've always been very conscious of the differences when it comes to mixing players with different abilities. When I ran the European Amputee Football Junior Camp, parents would sometimes come to me and say, "My child wants to join the camp, but he wears his leg." And I had to explain that they couldn't because it was an international amputee football camp that follows specific rules. If we allow one exception, we risk shifting away from the core of amputee football, which is played on crutches.

For me, playing with prosthetics can sometimes be dangerous. If I kick you with my prosthetic leg, I won't feel the impact, so I'll naturally follow through, which increases the risk of injury. But if I kick you with my natural leg, I'll feel the contact and pull back, reducing the risk of harm. Plus, running on prosthetics is awkward, and I've seen kids push themselves in ways that look unsafe, making me worry they'll hurt themselves.

What I suggest, especially when working with kids, is to let them start off with their prosthetic legs if they prefer or use crutches if they're comfortable. But after a few training sessions, they need to transition to amputee football rules. England's pan-disability league allows players to use crutches and prosthetics, but that mix can get confusing. It reminds me of watching the Paralympic swimming events, where different disabilities are scored differently, and it's hard to follow who's really winning because of all the adjustments for ability levels.

I think it's simpler and clearer to keep it strictly amputee football when we're talking about developing clubs. If you're setting up a training day in a place like Kyiv, I wouldn't create separate pitches for players who can run and those who can't. Instead, I'd pair the stronger players with the less experienced ones. Start by teaching everyone to walk on crutches before advancing to running. You can make the early sessions about walking drills so that no one feels overwhelmed. As the club grows and more experienced players come in, you can eventually have separate pitches for first and second teams, but all still following amputee football rules.

It's important to create pathways, like Brighton or other clubs, where you cater to different disabilities. But as an amputee football player myself, I wouldn't have wanted to play in a pan-disability league. I want to feel like a professional athlete, not someone with a "disabled" label on my back. It's all about striking that balance, especially with kids. It's got to be fun. Open days and workshops should focus on the players with the lowest abilities to make sure everyone feels included. That way, you're building a positive environment where people want to come back.

When I was in South Sudan, we had a situation where the crowd started laughing at some of the players who weren't doing so well. I took a pair of crutches into the crowd, handed them to some of the hecklers, and said, "Okay, your turn." Suddenly, everyone was laughing, including the crowd, and it became a fun experience for everyone. That's how you introduce people to the game—through fun and interaction.

Any good coach knows how to adapt their training to fit the group's ability, and as long as the players are having fun, they'll keep coming back.

*Funding**11. How do you secure funding for amputee football programs, particularly in regions with limited financial resources?*

The first step is to create awareness and establish a strong public image. This will be key to generating interest and opening up funding opportunities. While you might get some backing from the football association, when it comes to securing sponsorship, you can't just ask for €10,000 without a clear plan. You need to be specific.

Start by breaking down the costs. How much does a training session cost? You'll need a venue, water, maybe some snacks or energy drinks, and supplies for an open day like balloons or leaflets. Instead of relying solely on paper flyers, consider making a longer promotional video and putting it on USB sticks. These can be handed out at prosthetic clinics or events so that families can take them home, watch them, and get a real sense of what amputee football is all about.

Once you've got a clear idea of what you need, put together a budget and strategy. How many workshops or training days do you plan to run? What's the cost of each one? Can you get venues from the FA for free, or get water sponsored? Maybe a one-day event costs €500—break it down so that you know exactly what you're asking for. This will help you approach sponsors with a clear offer, like putting their logo on shirts or sponsoring specific events.

You'll also need to show potential sponsors what they get in return. Outline the media exposure—if your events are covered by local TV or radio, what's the value of that coverage? Demonstrate how their involvement can benefit their brand.

In the long term, think about organizing bigger events, like bringing an international team, such as Poland, to Ukraine for a demonstration game. This can help draw bigger crowds, generate media interest, and solidify amputee football's presence.

The key to success in Ukraine will be better structure and governance. Everyone needs clear roles, goals, and responsibilities. It can't all fall on one person. With the right plan in place, you'll be able to grow the sport and attract the support you need.

12. Can you quantify the financial resources typically required to establish and sustain an amputee football program in a region like Palestine?

The cost of running workshops really varies depending on the country and the specific resources needed. In some places, securing facilities might be relatively affordable, while in others it could be more expensive. For instance, you could approach sponsors like Ottobock to fund something like €2000 for several development days, but it's all about connecting with the right people.

Since you have contacts within the FA and UEFA, it's worth reaching out to them. Ask if their marketing department can help with creating a promotional video or if they can support your efforts. The Ukrainian FA likely already has the videographers and resources in place, so it's about tapping into those networks.

There's also a difference between a promotional video and an informational video. The goal would be to create a longer informational video—maybe around half an hour—that families can watch together. This type of video can help build belief in the organization and inspire more people to get involved.

13. *What have been the most effective strategies or partnerships in obtaining financial support for amputee football in conflict or economically challenged regions? Follow-up: Have governments been providing financial support to initiatives in Palestine, Ireland and others?*

In the beginning, when we first got involved with the Football Association of Ireland (FAI), they didn't give us any money. They said there was no room in the budget. They did offer us some uniforms and a bit of help, but they were really slow to follow through. Then, in 2014, we were getting ready for our first World Cup in Mexico, and I needed to raise €25,000 just for the flights. So, I went to Paddy Power, the bookmaker. He'd helped me out before, when I did the marathon, so I thought, why not ask if he'd sponsor the amputee football team?

Paddy Power came on board. What was brilliant is I didn't even have to promote him—he liked that I was doing the promoting for him. You can actually Google this: Paddy Power sponsored the Irish amputee football team. At the time, Oscar Pistorius was going through his legal issues, and Paddy Power ran a bet about whether Pistorius would walk out of the courtroom on two legs. The Advertising Standards Authority took them to court for it. And you know what? Paddy Power used us in their defense! They said, “We didn't mean any disrespect, we're proud supporters of amputee sports. We sponsor the Irish amputee football team.” So, the jokes aside, it worked out.

Paddy Power ended up paying €20,000 for us to go to the World Cup, while the FAI gave us just €2,000. In a press statement, I thanked Paddy Power for their incredible support, and I thanked the FAI for the €2,000 for kit and equipment. The FAI wasn't happy—they came back to me and said, “How dare you?” But I told them straight, “You're not giving us enough, I had to find a sponsor.” The very next year, they increased our budget to €10,000 a year.

Now, if you talk to Mateusz, he's the master at getting sponsorship. When he organized the European Championship in Poland, he had a professional company do a full analysis of the sponsorship value. They broke down how many times the sponsors appeared on YouTube, in the news, on Facebook, and they calculated that the marketing value for those companies was over €1 million, even though they'd only contributed around €200,000. He's definitely someone you should connect with on this. When it comes to funding, though, don't just ask for money. Often, companies are more willing to give you their products instead of cash. Look at different brands and products that might support you. And absolutely push for a high-profile ambassador to represent amputee football—it makes a huge difference.

Also, make it easy for sponsors to get involved. Put together clear documents—who is Ukrainian amputee football? What's the history? What are your goals and objectives? Why do you need the funding? If you send a professional PDF with all that information, it becomes much easier for companies to say yes to supporting you. That's how we did it, and it worked.

Infrastructure

14. *What are some of the biggest challenges regarding infrastructure when trying to set up amputee football leagues or teams in developing countries?*

It really depends on the country you're working in. Take Ireland, for example—transport isn't an issue, but finding players is because we just don't have that many amputees. And if we do, most of them are involved in Paralympic sports.

Now, in Gaza, transport is the biggest challenge. There's no public transport system, so getting people to training is tough. In South Sudan, the Red Cross used to give money to cover the cost of

getting to training, but it wasn't even for bus fare—people needed to come by tuk tuk or other means. So, when you're planning workshops, you really have to consider the region. Is transport easy? How accessible is the venue? These are key questions.

A big factor is the time commitment. Some people are fine with traveling two hours to training, but if it takes half a day just to get there and back, it's hard for them to give up that much time, especially if they have families or siblings to consider. It's a lot to ask someone to commit an entire day to travel for training.

That's why, if you're running these workshops, they need to be fun and engaging. It's not just about football. You should have people there who can share their experiences—maybe players who have traveled to Georgia, Mexico, or other countries for amputee football. Hearing their stories and the experiences they've had can really help sell the idea to new players and families. It's about creating an environment that's interactive and inspiring, where people see what's possible through the sport.

So, always consider the region's transport challenges and make sure the event is worth the trip by offering something more than just training—make it an experience.

15. What advice would you give to those trying to establish amputee football programs in places with limited resources, such as conflict zones or developing regions?

Let me be honest with you—I'm living proof that sport saved my life. Ten years ago, I tried to end my life. And now, when I look back, I think about all the incredible experiences I would have missed if I'd succeeded. People often say, "What if this, what if that," but with my hand on my heart—though I'm not a religious man—I could tell you, if someone offered to give me my leg back today, in exchange for erasing the last ten years, I wouldn't take it. I've achieved so much, and it wasn't just about becoming an athlete. My passion was about helping others who might feel like life is over to see that it's not, to show them there's a way forward.

Look at where amputee football is now compared to ten years ago. We're so close to reaching the Paralympics—it's incredible how far we've come.

So, if I were to give you advice on setting up amputee football in Ukraine, the most important thing would be good governance. You need to have the right people, the right coaches, and a solid structure. Players need regular opportunities to come together, to train, at least every two weeks, especially in different regions. You can't just have scattered sessions; people need that consistency to stay engaged. Another thing people overlook is the importance of team bonding. You can gather the best players in the world, but if they haven't trained together, lived together, played together, they won't have the chemistry they need on the field. It's not just about skill—it's about relationships and building that trust with each other.

In a place like Ukraine, where so many people are going through mental health struggles and dealing with trauma, amputee football can be a lifeline. It's an escape. For those few hours on the pitch, they can take off their prosthetics, leave their worries in the changing room, and just focus on the game. They're not thinking about their home or what they've lost—they're in the moment, playing football. And that escape is priceless.

And let's not forget the camaraderie. The real healing happens in the dressing room, among teammates. That bond, that friendship, that sense of belonging—those moments are more powerful

than anything they could get in a hospital or a therapist's office. It's about creating an environment where they want to be, where they feel connected to something bigger.

Training should be something players never want to miss. You know that feeling when your friends are going out, and even if you don't feel like going, you get this sense that if you don't go, you're going to miss something special? That's what football training should feel like. Players should want to be there, not just for the game, but because of the people, the experience, the shared moments.

And one more thing: professionalism. Even if things are falling apart behind the scenes, always make sure that what people see is polished and well-organized. People used to think that amputee football in Ireland had thousands of players because we looked so put-together on social media, but the truth is, every week I was holding it together with a bit of tape and glue. Still, no one saw the cracks because we told a story, we brought people along for the journey. Social media is huge in this. When I was working in Gaza, I'd post updates about where I was, what we were doing, training sessions—but I made sure it was always focused on the sport. People don't want to see politics or drama. They want to follow the journey of athletes, they want to see progress, and they want to feel like they're part of something bigger.

Remember, if you treat these players like athletes, they will become athletes. But if you treat them like they're disabled, they'll feel disabled. That's the key. Make it professional, make it inspiring, and watch how it transforms lives. Always keep in mind what the players need, put yourself in their shoes, and above all, make it professional. That's how you'll make a real difference.

Nick Sore – Senior Refugee Sport Coordination at UNHCR*Introduction*

1. *Could you share a bit about your journey with UNHCR? What initially drew you to work in the field of sports coordinator within the United Nations?*

I work for the UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR, not directly for the United Nations Secretariat, which is another entity within the broader UN system. UNHCR is a specialized agency within the UN, with its own mandate and responsibilities. My role is to contribute towards the goals of UNHCR, which involves supporting people displaced by conflict, persecution, and other crises. This, in turn, aligns with the broader humanitarian goals of the UN system.

Sport within the UN system is managed in different ways. There's the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) in New York, responsible for reporting on the UN's engagement with sport. Every couple of years, they publish a report by the Secretary-General on the UN's involvement in sport, gathering inputs from various agencies to celebrate the achievements of everyone involved. UNESCO, based in Paris, focuses on physical education and training, working closely with governments in this space.

UNHCR is a highly operational agency with over 136 country operations, more than 550 offices worldwide, and 20,000 staff members. We use sport proactively to improve the lives of the people we serve, including refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). Sport is a relatively new tool for UNHCR; we've only been intentionally using it for about 10 years.

Our work in sport centers around five main areas, each contributing to the well-being and support of refugees and displaced persons. First, sport and play-based programming is employed to enhance the physical and mental well-being of refugees, providing them with vital opportunities for engagement and community building. Second, we support elite refugee athletes, fostering initiatives such as the Refugee Olympic and Paralympic teams in collaboration with major organizations, including the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the International Paralympic Committee (IPC), UEFA, and FIFA. This support showcases talent while spotlighting resilience and perseverance on the global stage. Third, advocacy and communication efforts are strengthened through partnerships with sport brands and organizations, which help raise awareness about refugee issues by highlighting the power of sport as a unifying force. Fourth, sport diplomacy is leveraged to engage governments and key partners in discussions around refugee issues, facilitating conversations in a non-confrontational manner that fosters understanding and cooperation. Finally, resource mobilization is driven through collaborations with sport partners to generate essential resources that bolster support for forcibly displaced individuals, ensuring sustained efforts in improving their lives and opportunities.

General Questions on UNHCR and Sports

2. *In your experience, how has sports contributed to the mental health and reintegration of refugees or disabled people ?*

There is a growing body of evidence on the role that sport can play in improving psychosocial well-being in displacement situations. One of our partners in Uganda has recently produced valuable reports about a program called *Game Connect*, which specifically focuses on enhancing psychosocial well-being. They use randomized control trials to measure the outcomes, contributing to the expanding evidence in this area.

However, the issue of social inclusion and social cohesion is a bit more complex, as there isn't a strong body of evidence yet. While the general assumption is that sport can bring communities and individuals together, especially in refugee contexts, the supporting evidence is still limited. There are some indications that this approach works, but it's not robust enough at this stage, so we are continuing to investigate and build a stronger case for it.

In 2018, UNHCR, in collaboration with the International Olympic Committee, developed the Sport for Protection Toolkit to guide the use of sport in refugee and displacement settings, targeting three main outcomes. The first is improving social cohesion by fostering unity and connection within diverse communities through sport. The second focuses on enhancing social inclusion, particularly by integrating marginalized groups, including women and girls, LGBTQ individuals, youth, and people from various marginalized ethnicities or nationalities, into community activities. Lastly, the toolkit aims to boost psychosocial well-being, using sport as a tool to promote mental and emotional health, offering individuals a means of support and resilience-building in challenging environments.

UNHCR is actively working with partners to further develop an evidence base around the meaningful role that sport can play, especially in fostering social cohesion.

- 3. Can you share any specific examples where sports have significantly impacted a refugee community's integration or well-being?*

In Uganda, they conducted randomized control trials where one group participated in a sport activity specifically designed to improve psychosocial well-being, while the second group was simply given access to a sport activity without any specific purpose in mind.

The evidence showed that sport in general had a positive impact, increasing psychosocial well-being regardless of whether the intervention was targeted. However, the targeted interventions were approximately three times more effective in achieving the desired outcomes.

Implementing Sports Programs

- 4. What are the best practices that UNHCR has developed for implementing successful sports programs in refugee camps or conflict zones?*

That's an excellent question. In fact, during a recent presentation, I shared some top tips related to this topic. When we develop sport projects at UNHCR, we adopt the "sport for protection concept", which is aligned with frameworks like "sport for development", "sport for peace", or "sport and development", but with a unique focus. As a protection agency, UNHCR's primary mission is to safeguard the rights of the people we serve, which is why we frame our approach as "sport for protection".

When designing these programs, we ensure several foundational elements are integrated into every project. First and foremost, projects must guarantee equal access for all, regardless of gender, ability, ethnicity, or nationality. Equally important is having well-trained coaches and facilitators who can meet the unique needs of the communities they support. The development, design, and assessment of these programs must be participatory, involving targeted communities, including both refugee and internally displaced populations as well as the host communities that accommodate them.

Active community engagement is essential throughout the entire project lifecycle, from the initial assessment phase to the final evaluation, to ensure the program is aligned with the community's specific needs. The physical space used for sports or activities must not only be safe and suitable

but also psychologically safe and devoid of negative associations. Accessibility is crucial; it should be easy and safe for the community to reach these spaces.

Programs should provide regular opportunities for participation to establish a consistent routine. The timing must be appropriate for the target group's availability; for example, activities involving adolescent mothers should be scheduled when they are free from childcare or household responsibilities. Lastly, every program must include a strong referral system to address any protection issues that may arise. Coaches and facilitators should be well-trained to direct participants to the necessary services, whether for psychosocial support, medical assistance, or other protective needs, with a clear understanding of how the referral process works.

These core elements form the backbone of all sport for protection programs we implement at UNHCR, ensuring that they not only engage participants but also create a safe, inclusive, and supportive environment.

5. *What challenges does UNHCR face in implementing sports programs, especially in conflict zones like Ukraine?*

There are multiple challenges to consider. Safety and security are major concerns, especially depending on where you are in Ukraine and the specific abilities or disabilities of the participants. The location of the activities is also a key issue. For people with disabilities, access to assistive devices is a significant challenge, which can vary depending on the type of disability.

Transport is another big issue. We often encounter sport organizations wanting to organize activities for refugees but failing to account for transport funding. Most refugees don't live close to the activity sites, so they need a safe way to get there. Public or shared transport is usually the safest option, but it incurs a cost, and the cost of transport is always a concern.

In some refugee situations, though I'm not certain about the current situation in Ukraine, access to sufficient calories in food is a challenge. People need enough food to ensure that 30 to 60 minutes of physical activity per day is sustainable.

There are many factors to think about, which is why participatory assessments at the beginning of any project are so important. These assessments help us understand the challenges that individuals and communities face, ensuring that projects like this can become a reality.

Impact of programs

6. *What are the key indicators UNHCR uses to monitor the success of its sports programs?*

I'll send you our outcome framework so you can see how we set things up. The indicators we use are very much dependent on the outcomes we're trying to achieve. Typically, in our monitoring frameworks, we have 11 long-term outcomes, one intermediate outcome, and two or three outputs. The outputs contribute to the intermediate outcome, and the intermediate outcome contributes to the longer-term outcomes. The long-term outcomes we're aiming for are the ones I mentioned earlier: social inclusion, social cohesion, and improved psychosocial well-being.

The intermediate outcomes are detailed in the framework I'll send. Depending on the location, we develop specific indicators tailored to the project. However, we always have one standard indicator in our global results-based management framework, which tracks the number of participants, disaggregated by gender, ethnicity, age, and other factors. This indicator is always included. The other output indicators are developed based on the specific activities of the project.

We also have one indicator for the intermediate outcome and one for the long-term outcome. That said, we try not to run projects that are shorter than three years because the evidence shows that you don't see meaningful outcomes in a one-year project. You might see outputs, such as participation rates going up or down, but measuring outcomes over just one year is difficult.

We aim for multi-year sport projects, with a minimum duration of three years. This allows us to track changes over time, which is essential for understanding the role sport plays in improving people's lives and achieving positive change

7. How does UNHCR ensure that data collected from its sports programs are used to inform and improve future initiatives?

Yeah, it's a good question. And one of the ways that we do that is through our global results based management framework. And that's why we have a dedicated indicator there. But we're, you know, I also have a small team and we have someone in my team who's looking at.

We focus not only on the quality of project implementation but also on the data we receive from the projects we conduct with partners. While we have global data through our results-based management framework, we also evaluate each project individually and aim to learn from each one. About three or four years ago, we hired an external evaluation team to assess projects we implemented in Rwanda and Mexico. We integrated the lessons from that external evaluation into our current strategy.

If you review our strategy, you'll find that it discusses the evaluation, and there's a link to that evaluation within the strategy if you're interested.

Funding

8. What strategies has UNHCR implemented to ensure the long-term sustainability of its sports programs in terms of funding, impact and participation?

I think in the situations we work in, long-term sustainability is often not the primary objective. Ideally, we hope people will eventually can return home. However, as you can imagine—and are likely aware—that's becoming less and less common. Currently, there are about 123 million displaced people worldwide, which equates to roughly one in every 79 people on the planet. It's a staggering number, and many are not able to return home.

Our objective is to find solutions for these individuals, whether that means returning home, integrating into the host community, or, for some, resettling in a third country. In contexts where we know refugees will remain for a long time, we try to facilitate integration into the host community as much as possible. For example, with our education programs, we support host governments in integrating refugees into local schools, rather than setting up parallel systems. This ensures that refugees gain local language skills, knowledge, and certified qualifications, which are crucial for future employment opportunities. Without government-recognized education, it becomes challenging for refugees to secure jobs in the future.

Similarly, our approach to sports mirrors this strategy. We're working closely with organizations like the IOC and FIFA to engage national sports structures and integrate refugees into these systems at the country level. While we continue to develop projects and programs that provide activities for refugees, host communities, and IDPs, the long-term goal is to work with national

sports bodies to ensure refugees are included in these national structures. This is our sustainability approach.

9. What innovative or non-traditional funding sources has UNHCR explored for sports programs

The majority of our funding still comes from government donors, making up about 75% of our total. The largest share of this comes from the United States. Around 25% of our funding comes from non-traditional donors, including the private sector, faith-based organizations, and individual giving.

We've seen significant interest in sport from non-traditional donors, including individual donors, high-net-worth individuals, private sector entities, and sports organizations. A notable portion of the funding that is specifically earmarked for sport comes from these non-traditional donors.

Future Outlook

10. What advice would you give to those working to establish and grow amputee football in such challenging environments?

That's a good question. Are you asking specifically about an amputee football program or just a sports program in general?

If it's specifically about amputee football, I think it's important to work with the national structures. You're already talking to the Ukrainian National Association, which is key, but it might also be worth reaching out to relevant government departments. There's probably a Department of Sport or Youth and Sport in the government that could be important to talk to.

If you haven't spoken to UNESCO yet, it might be helpful. I know they've been in discussions with the Ministry of Education in Ukraine about organizing sports activities for young people and leveraging resources for that. These conversations are already happening, so it could be valuable to reach out to them. If you need a contact, I can provide one.

Additionally, there are NGOs and civil society organizations that are running sports activities both inside Ukraine and in the surrounding countries. It might be worth having a conversation with some of them as well. I can send you some names if that would be helpful.

Charles Tiné - Founder of The Small Projects Team, an N.G.O contributing with the advancement of amputee football in Ukraine*Introduction and Personal Journey*

1. *Can you share your personal journey with amputee football? What inspired your involvement in this area?*

I am Charles Tiné, I am a tech entrepreneur and founder of *The Small Projects Team*, an NGO created to support grassroots humanitarian initiatives. Our mission is to collaborate directly with beneficiaries, ensuring that micro-projects receive the aid they need. My passion for developing an amputee football project in Ukraine began when I watched the unfolding war in Ukraine from my home. Seeing the devastation and the impact it had on countless lives, I felt compelled to act. It was during my first visit to Ukraine that the reality of the situation hit me deeply—I saw firsthand the challenges that amputees faced, not just in terms of physical recovery but in reintegrating into society and finding hope beyond their injuries. Witnessing the strength and resilience of these individuals, I realized that something needed to be done to support them more effectively. Amputee football stood out as a powerful way to bridge this gap, offering not only physical rehabilitation but also psychological support, community, and a renewed sense of purpose. This experience inspired me to commit to creating a project that would help amputees rebuild their lives and reintegrate into their communities through the power of sport. I had the chance to meet the person who was creating the first club. Lviv was a strategic location for rehabilitation treatment because it housed two main centers: Superhuman, which is private and donation-based, and Unbroken, which is also donation-based but run by the municipality of Lviv as a project from the mayor. I was inspired by the sport, and I tried to help the club with funding from our foundation. Unfortunately, securing funds was challenging at the time, so we maintained contact, and I remained eager to become more involved in the development of the sport in Ukraine. I have quite an exhaustive view of the entire ecosystem. For instance, I accompanied the Ukrainian national team to Euro 2024 in Evian last June. I got to know the clubs and developed strong connections with the UAF (Ukrainian Football Association), which is the governing body for football in Ukraine.

Since discovering the potential of this sport, we have created a funding program aimed at developing amputee football across Ukraine. Our vision includes working with the UAF to fund about 20 clubs and contribute to forming a national league. The cost of running a club for one year is around €20,000, which covers uniforms, crutches, and equipment. The expenses are lower in the following years since the major initial investments are already made.

2. *Could you elaborate on the vision behind the UAmpFoot program and what specific outcomes you hope to achieve, particularly in terms of rehabilitation through amputee football?*

Our vision is to create a comprehensive ecosystem for amputee football in Ukraine. This involves more than just establishing teams—it includes raising awareness, training coaches, and providing medical and psychological support. You need more than just balls and goals; you need to address psychological and medical follow-ups to ensure that players are physically and mentally ready to participate. If people play too soon after amputation or rehabilitation, they risk harming the rest of their bodies, which must adapt to their new structure.

This initiative is as much a social project as a sports project. It serves as a final step in the reintegration process. Typically, after amputation, individuals go to a stabilization center, receive initial medical aid, and then move to a rehabilitation center like Superhuman or Unbroken. These

centers provide comprehensive care and support, but once individuals leave, they often face challenges integrating back into society. If they return to cities like Kyiv, they have better access to social life and support. However, many return to rural areas where social opportunities are limited, increasing the risk of depression and other issues. This is where sports come in to offer a sense of purpose and social engagement.

Our ultimate goal is to create a network of clubs across the country, ideally with at least one club in each oblast. This way, amputees have local opportunities to participate and rehabilitate socially and psychologically through sport. The second goal is to raise the level of the sport, positioning Ukraine as a strong competitor in international amputee football. Due to the large number of amputees from the war, Ukraine has the potential to become a leader in this sport for both social and competitive reasons.

Participation and Recruitment

3. *What strategies have been the most effective in recruiting amputees to take part in football in Ukraine?*

The most effective strategy is to collaborate with hospitals and rehabilitation centers, as these are natural points of contact for potential players. This is why Lviv was the first place to establish a club—it has these key rehabilitation centers. Additionally, working with the Ministry of Veterans is essential because many amputees are veterans. The UAF can also play a big role by using its platform to raise awareness, leveraging influential figures like Shevchenko to speak on the topic. In Odesa, for example, they used simple methods like putting up posters in public areas and using social media and WhatsApp groups to spread the word. The main challenge is funding !

4. *How many amputee football clubs are currently active in Ukraine ?*

Currently, there are three main clubs: Pokrova in Lviv, Shakhtar in Kyiv, and a new team in Cherkasy. There are also other projects in the early stages, such as in Odesa. However, these aren't fully established yet. For example, because Pokrova faced challenges due to the lack of a Ukrainian league, they joined the Polish Championship to compete at a higher level.

Development of Amputee Football

5. *What are some lessons and best practices learned from expanding amputee football to multiple clubs in Ukraine? And what the challenges you've encountered in expanding amputee football across various regions in Ukraine?*

A sustainable, long-term strategy is crucial. It should include setting up a central training center in Kyiv to educate coaches and mentor those looking to start clubs. This center would provide all the necessary tools, from training methods to information on equipment and psychological support. It's also important to share successful practices from established clubs like Pokrova to replicate their model across the country.

6. *The program aims to have five major teams across Ukraine by 2025. What strategies are in place to develop these teams, and how are you identifying locations for these teams?*

The figure of five or six clubs is the minimum needed to create a competitive league. The aim is to have at least one club in each oblast to ensure broad participation. Major clubs in each oblast should support the creation of smaller clubs in nearby cities. This helps to create a network where the larger club acts as a hub for regional development.

7. *How do you track and measure the impact of amputee football in terms of participation, mental health benefits, and community integration?*

Not at the moment. It's too early to have precise data on the impact. The current focus is on building awareness and establishing the infrastructure. As the ecosystem grows and more people become aware of the sport, we expect to see an increase in participation. When amputees talk about their experiences in amputee football, it's clear that it has a positive impact on their lives. However, it will take time to gather comprehensive data.

Funding

8. *How do you secure funding for amputee football programs, particularly in regions with limited financial resources? Which ones have been the most successful?*

Initially, we aimed to engage European football clubs, hoping they would contribute through their foundations. However, we found that most club foundations have strict local mandates and couldn't fund international projects. For instance, while Liverpool's foundation was enthusiastic, but they were restricted to supporting local communities. So, we pivoted to our established funding sources, which include SMEs, individual donors, and regional programs. For example, we are trying to leverage the relationship between Marseille and Odesa, as they are twinned cities.

9. *What are the average costs of an amputee football program, including expenses such as transport, infrastructure, training, and travel and how has this cost impacted participation rates? Is it expensive for players to participate?*

The first-year budget for a club is around €20,000, which covers initial equipment and set-up. After the first year, the running costs decrease as you don't need to repurchase many items. Organizing a league would fall under the UAF's responsibilities. We focus on supporting clubs, not running the league. We haven't broken down costs per player specifically. Our role is to help clubs get started with initial funding, oversight, and the necessary support for training and medical services. We ensure the funds are used properly, but it's up to the clubs to manage their finances.

10. *What are the costs per player?*

It's not an exercise I have done before, but my goal is to help them launch and give them the tools they need to get started. I want to be able to kick things off and ensure they have the means to run the pitch—whether it's paying doctors, physios, coaches, buying crutches, equipment, or shoes.

We hope that after some time, after enough matches and enough momentum, they'll be able to sustain themselves. Of course, we'll continue to support them as needed, but we're not going to take over the role of those creating the clubs. What we want to ensure is that they are serious. We vet them, we collaborate with them, and we don't just hand over money immediately.

We maintain financial oversight and try to make sure we have people on the ground, like a project manager in charge, who can scrutinize, analyze, and discuss with them. This ensures we can show our donors that these are serious initiatives with real impact. Our role is to select and assess whether a project is legitimate. We don't release funds until we are confident they will do a good job.

Awareness

11. What best practices have you found most effective in raising awareness for amputee football in countries where the sport is less known or where disability is still stigmatized?

In Odesa, the approach included using posters in public places and leveraging social media and community networks like WhatsApp. The connection with rehabilitation centers like Superhuman also helps reach potential players directly.

Infrastructure and Challenges

12. What infrastructure or resources were critical to the initial development of amputee football in Ukraine ?

The basic requirements include a football pitch, goals, cones, balls, and other general equipment. However, the key difference is that you need specially designed crutches that are strong enough to withstand the demands of the game. Football is the most popular sport by far in Ukraine, so you have many pitches across each city, like in France and Germany.

Media and Promotion

13. What media strategies have been the most successful for promoting amputee football in Ukraine?

The UAF, when they officially launch their program, will have all the resources needed to reach the press effectively. They can leverage notable figures like Shevchenko for publicity, which will bring significant attention to the sport. I anticipate that President Zelensky and the First Lady will also support the initiative, which would greatly enhance visibility.

Future Outlook

14. What's your vision for the program's growth over the next year and next five years, especially in relation to Ukraine's current needs?

Given the estimated 60,000 to 100,000 amputees in Ukraine, the need for social reintegration through sport is immense. Our immediate goal is to establish the ecosystem and training centers, aiming to have 10 to 20 clubs within a year. Over the next five years, we hope to position Ukraine as a leader in amputee football, participating in international competitions and promoting inclusivity by involving children and women in the sport. Even if there aren't enough women to form separate teams, they could be integrated into male teams to foster inclusivity.

15. What advice would you give to Ukraine who wish to develop their amputee football programs?

Create a solid ecosystem as quickly as possible and communicate effectively. The goal should be to make the sport accessible across the country, so people don't have to travel hundreds of kilometers to play. The sport should be seen as competitive and inspiring, not just as a disability sport. This change in perception will help with integration and acceptance. These players are. When you watch a match, it's not just about their missing leg anymore. I see strategy, I see a real football game. I see people running, making great plays. I'm not focused on their physical differences; I'm seeing athletes.

In Ukraine, these players are considered heroes, and rightfully so, because most of them are veterans or victims of war. If you haven't been to Ukraine, you might not fully grasp it, but there, every soldier is seen as a hero. You don't talk about them as just veterans; they are heroes. That's really important to understand.

During the European Championship, when I was with the Ukrainian squad in a small Alpine village, we trained on a local beach where kids from the nearby school had their sports classes. We shared the pitch, half for us and half for the kids. It was incredible to see how those kids looked at the players. They were in awe, excited, laughing, and talking to the players. They didn't focus on the fact that the players had a missing leg. They saw athletes playing football exceptionally well, even joking around, saying things like, 'One-legged players are running faster than you!'

It's amazing to think that these kids, after seeing that, probably went home and told their parents, 'We saw the Ukrainian team today! They only have one leg, but they play so well!' Their vision of disability likely changed that day. Amputation can be striking because it's so visible and it doesn't match the structured image of a body in people's minds. It's different from seeing someone in a wheelchair or someone who's blind. But those kids, after that day, didn't see a handicap—they saw high-level athletes. And that can change how they view disability forever.

Christian Heintz - Managing Director German Amputee football

Introduction and Personal Journey

1. *Can you share your personal journey with amputee football? What motivated you to get involved in this field?*

Yes, I'd be happy to share. I'll start with my leg amputation in 2010 when I was 26 years old. Up until then, I was a passionate football player and, of course, I thought, 'Oh no, how can I play football with just one leg?' However, while still in the hospital, I found a flyer about amputee football, which was a total beacon of hope for me — the idea that I could play again with just one leg.

I then took two years before reaching out to the amputee football community that already existed in Germany at that time. In 2012, I attended my first training session and was instantly hooked. By 2014, I increasingly took on voluntary organizational responsibilities.

I did that voluntarily for a few years. I then approached a non-profit organization. I approached the non-profit organization, so to speak, in quotation marks. Together with 'Anpfiff ins Leben', we were able to launch a so-called five-year model project. With the support of the 'Aktion Mensch' foundation, I was able to do this full-time from 2019 to early 2024 and could focus on the nationwide development of this sport. The official funding was planned to run until the end of 2023, but it was extended for another 3 months due to a COVID interruption, officially ending on March 3.

Of course, as early as 2022, we had already started discussions with German sports associations about this. These included the German Disabled Sports Association (Deutscher Behindertensportverband) and the German Football Association (DFB) through the Sepp Herberger Foundation. Unfortunately, neither of these sports associations could commit to supporting us in the future, citing the reason that we are not a Paralympic sport.

As a result, this led to the founding of our own association earlier this year in the spring, and we have now established our own umbrella organization specifically for German amputee football. It is currently funded through donations. We have now found our first supporter, a foundation from Switzerland, and that is the current situation in Germany.

Development of Amputee Football

2. *Currently, there are 5 teams, if I'm correct: Mainz, Düsseldorf, Hoffenheim, TB Berlin, and Hamburger SV. What strategies helped grow amputee football in Germany?*

One of our most crucial strategies was partnering with medical supply stores and clinics. I dedicated a lot of time to forming these partnerships because people who have undergone amputations often end up in hospitals and later visit prosthetic technicians. Our aim was to ensure that people in these places knew about amputee football, that they could be provided with a flyer, and that prosthetic technicians, doctors, and nurses would act as multipliers to spread the message.

These partnerships were key contact points. Through them, we were able to recruit several amputee football players. Another important factor was public relations, which included everything from social media and TV appearances to newspaper articles and other press coverage. The well-known names of the clubs, such as Mainz 05, Fortuna Düsseldorf, and HSV, played a significant role in boosting our visibility and public reach. These two aspects were pivotal for us.

3. *Do you think has Turkey and Poland excelled so much in developing their programs? Exactly, in Turkey, it has to do with the history — the sport has existed there since the 1980s. It is supported by both the Turkish Football Federation and the Disabled Sports Federation, and they provide substantial*

support. The sport is very popular. There are three leagues in Turkey, and players in the top league actually earn their living from playing. The matches are broadcast live on free TV there.

The essential part is the strong support from both the football federation and the disabled sports federation. In Poland, it's a bit different. They don't have as long a history, but they were quick to find sponsors who provided financial support. This allowed them to hire full-time staff and manage revenues. Those are the two main reasons for the success in these countries. So mainly the support from the structures of the associations and, let's say, sponsorship and financial backing.

Participation and Awareness

4. What is in your opinion key best practice to increase awareness in the game?

Yes, two points, two clear answers. First, definitely the connection with clinics and medical supply stores — that's where the amputees are, and that's where they need to be engaged. The second point is public relations — continuously and increasingly being in the public eye so that as many people with amputations as possible know that this sport exists.

5. What efforts are being made to introduce amputee football to younger audiences?

Yes, from 2021 to 2024, we organized an annual junior camp here in Germany for our young German players. Participation started from as young as 7-8 years old up to 16 years old. It's nice to see that some of these juniors from three years ago are now playing in the Bundesliga and even took part with our national team at the European Championship this summer. Unfortunately, due to financial Additionally, you might have already heard about the annual European Junior Camp organized by the EAFF, which has been taking place since 2017, and our young German players have always participated.

6. What are the biggest risks you see in the development of the amputee football league in Germany, and how do you plan to minimize them?

At the end of the day, it all comes down to financing so that we can implement our Bundesliga matchdays. I always give a specific example: when we still had 'Aktion Mensch' as a sponsor, we were able to finance a livestream.

Through this livestream and the recordings, a documentary was compiled for the broadcaster Sky, which was very well received. This also allowed, for example, last year's 'Goal of the Month' to feature a bicycle kick by a Düsseldorf player. And unfortunately, we couldn't implement the livestream this year due to a lack of financial resources. This is, of course, the biggest risk: that we need funding to organize the matches themselves but also to conduct important public relations work. This is crucial to revive and maintain public interest and visibility.

7. Does being affiliated with professional clubs help, and what options are available in Germany?

Yes, being affiliated with professional clubs definitely helps. It provides a good financial budget, which allows for overnight stays, travel, etc. However, one challenge or difficulty in Germany is the geographical situation. We have five clubs that cover all of Germany, which means each club has players who travel long distances for training. As a result, it's currently only feasible for clubs to offer joint training sessions every two weeks. This is because some players have to travel up to three hours, so joint training only happens every two weeks. During the week, most players train with their local clubs, alongside able-bodied players, to stay fit. But that's the geographical challenge we face here in Germany.

8. Is there any support in this regard? From the clubs, I mean. Is there support to help cover the costs of these long journeys financially?

Yes, there is definitely financial support from the clubs. But of course, each player has their job, family, and so on, and it is quite an effort to travel 2-3 hours to training. However, financial support from the clubs is certainly provided, yes.

9. *Are there specific challenges in training design for amputee footballers? Compared to other sports or, specifically, compared to training for able-bodied players, are there particular things that need to be considered?*

I always mention this — the nice thing about our sport is that training is about 90% similar to regular football training, with passing drills, shooting practice, crosses, tactical exercises — very, very similar. And then there is perhaps around 10% where we practice crutch-specific running. That's a bit different, of course, but otherwise, it is very similar to regular football training, yes.

10. *In terms of coaches, are there special training programs? Do they need comprehensive training, or how does it work? How do you ensure that there are enough coaches available?*

Currently, we are at a stage where there is no specific coach training in Germany for amputee football. We are in a situation where anyone who wants to get involved as a coach or goalkeeping coach is warmly welcomed and can join us to get an idea and participate. These are usually coaches who come from regular football and gain knowledge through networking and experience sharing. For example, last year, as part of the model project, we organized a weekend workshop for all the coaches we have. We would love to offer such workshops more frequently, but, unfortunately, it's not financially feasible at the moment.

Funding

11. *How do associations like the WAFF or UEFA contribute to supporting your initiatives?*

The global and European associations for amputee football do provide good support within their capabilities, especially in terms of networking and experience sharing. However, it's not the case that there is specific financial support for our country or others, as the global and European associations are also still looking for sponsors and funding sources. But overall, when it comes to questions, networking, or experience sharing, there is a very friendly and supportive atmosphere, with people like Mateusz Widłak or formerly Simon Baker, for instance. I can only speak positively about that. I can only speak positively about that.

12. *Can you quantify the financial resources typically required to establish and sustain an amputee football league?*

Exactly. I'd say it really starts with the costs for the referees, including their travel, accommodations, and fees. In Germany, we still play 5-a-side instead of the official 7-a-side format because we are still in the development phase, and this requires a specific goal size.

For that, we use the goals from blind football. There is a service provider who delivers the goals to us and sets up the advertising boards around the field. These are obviously costs incurred on match weekends. Additionally, there are expenses for providing food and drinks for the players, as well as snacks, etc. And at the end of the season, there are also costs for championship trophies, medals, and so on. As mentioned, public relations are also important, which includes regular updates for social media channels, website maintenance, press work, and ideally a livestream. These are the costs associated with a Bundesliga season. Yes, I can certainly share some figures with you. I'll use data from last year, when we had full service — including a livestream and everything involved. The costs for match operations alone were around €40,000. Additionally, the costs for the livestream and public relations were around another €60,000. So, if it's really with full service and everything included, we're looking at approximately €100,000 per year. Yes, so the €100,000 is calculated specifically for one Bundesliga season — just the league. Additionally, there are costs for the national team, which now participates in an international tournament every year. This year,

we were at the European Championship, in 2025 we will be at the Nations League, which already exists, and in 2026, we qualified for the World Cup.

And with that comes the need for 4-5 training camps a year, equipment, jerseys, everything that goes along with it, which incurs costs. If we were to implement a junior camp, you could expect an additional €80,000 to €100,000. So, to operate comfortably, we would need around €200,000 per year to carry out our activities effectively. And with that amount, 99% of the work is still voluntary — no paid positions. Like our national coaches at this year's European Championship, who all worked on a voluntary basis. And yes, that's what it takes, and we are proud of it here in Germany, that we stand together and commit ourselves to this cause. The €200,000 encompasses the entire ecosystem — the national team, training camps, league operations, travel

Infrastructure

12. What role does the German F.A or other governing bodies play in supporting your initiatives?

The main issue now is that amputee football is not a paralympic sport. If the sport were to become Paralympic, the situation would change. The World Association is working diligently on this. 2032 is considered realistic for this, and when that happens, our sport will automatically be affiliated with the German Disabled Sports Association (DBS). This would, in turn, lead to automatic funding from DBS.

Future Outlook

13. What advice would you give to those trying to establish an amputee football league in Ukraine?

Affiliation with potential professional teams and well-known names is important for public relations. Ideally, there should also be cooperation with the football association and the disabled sports association. And, of course, appearing in hospitals and clinics is essential so that those who are injured know that this sport exists.

14. Are there possibilities for collaboration on your side as well? For example, to organize a game or something like that?

Yes, we would be very interested in that kind of collaboration. In fact, something similar has already taken place this year on a small scale. Injured soldiers from Ukraine came to Berlin for rehabilitation and even participated in the Bundesliga with Tennis Borussia Berlin. Yes, but unfortunately, after a period of two to three months, these injured players had to return to Ukraine, so it couldn't become a permanent involvement in the match operations. But if there are opportunities for a friendly match, or as you might have heard, a Ukrainian team participated in the Polish league. If there were opportunities for a Ukrainian team to participate in the league here next year, we'd be open to it, although we're talking about significant costs. But we are generally open to such things, yes.

Mateusz Widlak - President of the World Amputee Football Federation*Introduction and Personal Journey*

1. *Can you share your personal journey with amputee football? What inspired your involvement in this area?*

Well, I've been working in amputee football for about 14 years now. In the beginning, I was younger, doing various things, and I was also a student at the time. Back then, I was involved in football in small ways—organizing small tournaments and writing articles. I wasn't a journalist per se, but I wrote about football. I discovered amputee football through a documentary, and it intrigued me. Initially, I thought I'd write an article about it. But as I started researching, I realized how significant it already was on a global level—there were World Cups and active teams in several countries, even though it wasn't as big as it is today. In my search for information, I assumed Poland must have something similar. But to my surprise, I found there was nothing—no teams, no players, and no one even knew about amputee football. That realization sparked the idea. I thought: if there are teams in Germany, England, and elsewhere, surely there must be people in Poland who would want to play. That was how it all started. At the time, I wasn't thinking about Champions Leagues, UEFA partnerships, or players like Robert Lewandowski—all of which we have now. My focus was on the first group of amputees I found. They weren't players yet, but they were incredible people with so much energy and ambition. From there, we built Poland's first amputee football team.

2. *What is the current status of amputee football? Is there any available data on the number of players, recent growth trends, and overall development of the sport?*

Amputee football originated in the 1980s in the USA. For many years, it was a relatively small sport. Initially, there were just 8 countries involved, which later grew to 12. For decades, it was the same group of teams and players from each country participating. They would come together as friends to play informal tournaments, including World Cups, every year or two. However, the sport was not widely known, and it remained very niche for a long time. About 10 years ago, things started to change significantly, particularly when Simon Baker joined the sport. Around the same time, I became actively involved, and we began making efforts to grow amputee football. This marked a turning point.

One of our key initiatives was to integrate amputee football into the broader football family. For many players, this had always been a dream, but no one had pursued it actively. We started building relationships between mainstream football organizations and the amputee football community. Alongside this, we worked hard on promotion and expanding the sport to new countries. Today, amputee football has grown tremendously. The World Amputee Football Federation (WAFF) now includes 60 member countries across five continents. Overall, the sport is played in more than 70 countries, and we're seeing rapid growth, particularly in Africa and Asia. Africa is currently the fastest-developing region, with several new countries joining the sport every year.

If we look at Europe, there are 19 active countries participating in amputee football. We're continuing to work on expanding this number and adding new member nations to the community. Yes, those numbers from 2020 reflect the statistics we had at the time. We're actively tracking data in Europe annually and have the latest figures available, though I don't have them memorized right now. I can check and share those updated statistics with you later. Overall, the sport's growth in recent years has been significant, and we continue to see new players and teams join globally.

Developing Amputee Football

3. *What strategies helped grow amputee football in Poland, and why do you think for example has Turkey excelled so much in developing their programs?*

That's a good question, and I noticed on your slide that you've done thorough research. It's true that Turkey is the largest country in amputee football, and Poland is also a leader in the sport. However, the number of players in Turkey's clubs is astonishing, especially when compared to Europe—they are absolutely at the top. Poland ranks second, but our numbers are much smaller. Despite this, I think Poland has excelled in areas where Turkey hasn't. For example, while Turkey has sheer numbers, we've done exceptionally well in building the foundation of the sport. In Poland, we've worked on creating a sustainable structure with funding, media support, and engagement from major clubs. So, while our numbers aren't as large, I'd argue that we've developed the discipline better overall.

Turkey's success is something we're still analyzing. My personal theory is that it's a unique combination of two factors: their football culture and their military culture. Veterans hold a significant place in Turkish society, and their military history is deeply ingrained in their national identity. This cultural backdrop has contributed to the development of amputee football. The origins of the sport in Turkey were tied to political initiatives. The government wanted to show strong support for veterans and ex-soldiers, which gave the sport significant visibility and backing from the beginning. This political endorsement was crucial. On top of that, Turkey's passionate football culture provided an ideal environment for the sport to thrive.

I've suggested that Ukraine could adopt a similar approach. As I've mentioned to people there, amputee football could become a politically significant issue—but in a positive way. Politicians could use the sport to demonstrate their support for veterans and displaced individuals. This could help integrate amputee football into Ukrainian society and ensure its growth. In Poland, our success has stemmed not only from our football culture but also from the leadership we had at the start. A strong leader—or even just one dedicated individual—can make all the difference in developing the sport. This is something I've noticed in my work with other countries. Whenever we start in a new country, the presence of a committed leader is the most critical factor.

In Ukraine, we faced challenges early on because we couldn't find the right person to lead the initiative. For months—nearly a year—we searched for someone capable of driving the sport forward. Once we finally identified the right individual, things started growing rapidly. He's doing amazing work now, and that's exactly what was needed. In Poland, another factor that contributed to our success was our collaboration with mainstream football. Partnering with regular football clubs and organizations helped us gain visibility and credibility. Turkey, on the other hand, has relied heavily on government support. They don't have much private sponsorship or independent funding. Even the visibility they receive on television is often the result of political decisions. While this government backing has been a strength, it also makes their model quite different from ours in Poland.

4. *How did you manage to involve someone like Lewandowski?*

This process was challenging and took a lot of hard work over many years. One of our first major breakthroughs came when we started collaborating with a well-known football player in Poland. His name was Kamil Grosicki. He might not be as famous internationally, but in Poland, he's quite well-known. Grosicki had played in France, England, and for the Polish national team. For example, Łukasz Fabiański, the goalkeeper who played for Arsenal and spent many years in the Premier League, supported us. He's a great guy and played a crucial role in promoting amputee football. Then, the biggest breakthrough came when Robert Lewandowski joined our efforts. That was a game-changer for us. Lewandowski's involvement gave us unprecedented visibility and

credibility, both in Poland and internationally. At the same time, we worked on promotional events with FIFA and partnered with some well-known football journalists in Poland. These journalists helped amplify our message and spread awareness about amputee football to a broader audience. Lewandowski's support was undoubtedly the most significant factor in helping us grow at that stage. It was a process to bring him on board, but once he was involved, everything changed for the better. This combination of support from top players, collaboration with FIFA, and help from influential journalists made a huge difference in raising the profile of amputee football in Poland and beyond.

5. *What was the first major milestone for amputee football in Poland?*

Looking back at our history in Poland, which spans over 12 years, there were several milestones that helped us grow step by step. Some of these milestones were the result of careful planning, where we knew exactly what we wanted to achieve and worked hard for it. Others came about through luck, but we always made sure to put in the effort to create opportunities for that luck to happen.

At the start, the milestones were relatively small, especially compared to where we are now. The first milestone was creating the Polish national amputee football team. That was the foundation. The second milestone was organizing our first international tournament in Poland. It was a small event, but we invited journalists to cover it, and it became newsworthy simply because the team existed and was playing.

The next big milestone was participating in our first World Cup as a national team. These initial steps helped us grow steadily. We were always looking for ways to create significant moments that would help us grow further over the next year or two. One of the biggest milestones came when we hosted the European Championship in Poland. This was something we had planned for years, and it turned out to be a massive event for us. We organized it at a very high level, with TV coverage, major sponsors, wide promotion, and notable ambassadors. It became a turning point for the sport in Poland.

For instance, during the European Championship, we recorded the highest-ever number of fans attending a disabled sport event in Poland. We also had live TV broadcasts for the first time, with very high viewership numbers. Since then, all of our games have been televised. These events didn't just focus on what happened on the pitch; they were designed as promotional tools to grow the sport, bring in media attention, and attract fans to the stadiums. A good example of how this helped us is in comparison to England. The English Football Federation is very strong and, after Turkey and Poland, is one of the key players in amputee football. However, they don't organize events domestically, which limits their growth. Despite their football culture, world-renowned clubs, and many high-profile players, their amputee football scene still operates on a small budget and hasn't achieved the same level of visibility.

This is surprising, especially considering the broader disabled sports culture in England. For instance, the Paralympics in London was a transformative event for the entire disabled sports movement. Despite this, they haven't leveraged their infrastructure and football culture to organize impactful events for amputee football. For Ukraine, I understand it might currently be challenging to organize international events due to the ongoing situation. However, even national events can be highly effective if done well. By focusing on quality and making these events more than just games—by involving media, fans, and sponsors—you can create the momentum needed to grow the sport significantly.

I've been thinking about organizing amputee football events—starting with smaller-scale events like friendly games or tournaments, then progressing to larger ones. These could include international tournaments or European Federation events, such as the Nations League, Champions League, European Championship, or even Junior Cups. At the very beginning in Poland, we focused heavily on promotional events. We used major football events as platforms to showcase amputee football. For example, we arranged short exhibition matches during halftime at big football games in full stadiums.

What's unique about amputee football is that it has a strong visual impact. A simple image of an amputee football player in action—on crutches, playing with one leg—can tell an incredibly powerful story. It's striking and immediately grabs attention. This visual appeal makes it easier to promote the sport, especially in countries where amputee football isn't well known. Sometimes, all it takes is showcasing the players during a national team game or even just highlighting them in the media. That alone can generate significant buzz and interest.

6. *Do you have any performance indicators to measure the impact?*

In terms of measuring our reach, we rely on reports from external companies that analyze media exposure. These reports provide data on how many people saw our content, such as the number of viewers for TV broadcasts or articles in newspapers. These reports are primarily for sponsors, showing them the visibility their support generates. We have reports for our major events and also yearly reports. Some of these are even available in English, so I can share them with you if you'd like.

If I could add something to the last question: a great idea is to start with national teams. In many European countries, amputee football begins with a small group of players forming a national team. That team is then used to promote the sport, and from there, it grows. Over time, clubs are created, and ideally, they align with the biggest football clubs in the country. For example, in Poland, after some years, we partnered with top clubs, which was a game-changer. That's a key issue in Turkey. One challenge they face is a lack of stability. Their clubs often change names or structures every season. This is partly due to an oligarchic culture, where wealthy individuals fund clubs for a short time, bringing in the best players, but then withdraw their support after a couple of seasons.

If Turkey's major clubs decided to formally integrate amputee football, it would create long-term stability. It would also generate a sense of responsibility to fans and the sport. With the strong football culture in Turkey, this integration could attract significant fan support, strengthening the sport for years to come.

Awareness & Participation

7. *How did you initially get people interested in amputee football, both players and the broader community?*

In amputee football, the biggest challenge is always finding the first group of players. In my experience, once you have that initial group, it becomes much easier to find coaches and even secure a budget. But identifying those first players is the hardest part, especially in regions where the sport is new. When we're creating new clubs in cities or starting in new countries, finding those initial players is always the main hurdle. This challenge is particularly true in Europe, whereas in poorer regions like parts of Africa or Asia, there are often more disabled individuals who might be interested in playing.

In Poland, when I was starting out, it was even more difficult because tools like Facebook weren't as widely used then. So, I had to take a more hands-on approach. One effective strategy was reaching out to prosthetics companies. I would visit these companies with promotional materials and talk directly with physiotherapists and other staff who had direct contact with amputees. It was crucial to inspire these professionals and make them ambassadors for amputee football. It wasn't just about giving them a poster or a flyer—it was about showing them the passion behind the sport and convincing them to encourage amputees to participate.

Another avenue was working with foundations and NGOs that support people with disabilities, particularly amputees. However, this wasn't always easy because, unlike other disabilities, there aren't always centralized groups or organizations dedicated specifically to amputees. We also tried to tap into the fan base of mainstream football clubs and football associations (FAs). Many amputees are football fans themselves, so leveraging this connection helped us reach potential players. As the sport grew, we began using media more extensively. It was always important to emphasize that we were looking for new players. This call to action was included in every interview, article, or piece of promotional material: we invited people to join regardless of their city, age, or experience level.

Existing players also played a big role in recruitment. They often had connections with other amputees through prosthetics companies or personal networks, which helped expand our reach. Today, we're still looking for new players, but now we're focusing on specific groups, such as women and juniors. Direct contact remains the most effective way to recruit. While social media is a useful tool—especially if a major club like Real Madrid promotes the sport—it should always be used as an additional method, not the primary one. For example, we've found that many newly disabled individuals may feel hesitant or fearful about joining. Direct outreach helps overcome this barrier and encourages them to take the first step. Personalized, face-to-face interaction is always the most effective approach.

8. *What are some of the biggest challenges regarding infrastructure when trying to set up amputee football leagues or teams?*

In my opinion, infrastructure isn't a major challenge in amputee football. One of the advantages of the sport is that we can use regular football venues for training sessions and tournaments. It doesn't require specialized facilities, which makes it much more accessible compared to other disabled sports. Amputee football is also a very affordable sport. For instance, wheelchair basketball, which you mentioned earlier, requires specialized wheelchairs that can cost up to €10,000. On top of that, it needs specific court surfaces and additional equipment, which significantly increases costs. In amputee football, it's the opposite. If a player doesn't have a prosthesis, they might perform better on the field—it's a sport where the equipment costs are minimal. Players in Africa, for example, often train on the beach, and it still works well for them. There are discussions and ideas floating around about building amputee football-specific stadiums, but to be honest, I'm not a big fan of the idea. I don't think such infrastructure is necessary. For instance, if you watched the game at Beşiktaş, you'd see how great the sport looks in a regular football stadium. We've also been using standard football venues, and they work perfectly for us. The only slight challenge we face sometimes is related to natural grass. In countries where the sport is new, there's often hesitation about letting amputee football be played on natural grass. People worry about potential damage to the field. However, this concern is usually resolved once they see how the sport is played. Overall, I don't think infrastructure is a significant obstacle for the growth of amputee football.

*Funding**9. How do you secure funding for amputee football programs, particularly in regions with limited financial resources?*

In Poland, our budget is a combination of public and private funding. To be honest, we have a really strong budget right now, but it's because we have many projects, and everything is growing quickly. Most disabled sports in Poland rely entirely on public funding, but our situation is different. For public funding, we primarily receive support from the Ministry of Sports and an institution that supports NGOs working with disabled people. Additionally, when we organize events, we secure public money through regional, city, and district grant programs. These grants are a significant source of support. The largest share of our funding comes from the Sports Ministry and this institution for disabled people. However, about half of our budget comes from private sponsors. Right now, we have around 12 private sponsors. A few years ago, we made a concerted effort to develop our relationships with sponsors. This included creating a structured system for sponsorships, leveraging media, and generating significant public interest. In Poland, it's not about political decisions to secure funding—you need to sell the project. We developed strategies inspired by regular football, ensuring we could offer something attractive to sponsors. Media reach and visibility were key selling points. I believe this approach can be replicated in many other countries. In the future, we're even looking into potential TV rights deals for amputee football. The opportunities are there, but it's a process that requires ongoing work.

10. Is there any data available on the economic impact of amputee football that could help secure funding and sponsorships?

We have sponsorship reports, and I'll send those to you. They include valuable information on the sponsorship value we've achieved, which is substantial. These numbers highlight the potential of the sport and demonstrate its worth to sponsors. These reports show the value we've built over time. It's a result of the work our team has done to maximize the sport's visibility and appeal. But this is also a future focus area—to consistently improve these numbers and show the sport's growth potential. Ukraine, or any country for that matter, can achieve similar results—or even surpass them—if they follow a structured approach. My philosophy is always to build the value of a project first. Whether it's launching a new initiative like the Champions League, the first step is creating something meaningful and valuable. Once that's in place, it's much easier to sell it to sponsors and stakeholders.

11. Can you quantify the financial resources needed to sustain an amputee football program?

It's very different depending on the country, but when we started in Poland, most of the clubs had a budget of €0 per season. Everything was provided for free—pitches, training facilities, and even the coaches volunteered their time because they wanted to support the sport. Now, things have evolved. The budgets of our clubs are significantly higher. Some clubs operate with budgets of €60,000 to €80,000 per year. In some cases, they even provide small payments to players. If someone asks me how much money is needed to start a club, it's difficult to give a precise answer because it depends on the resources available. However, we do have data on the budgets of the current clubs in our league, and I can share those numbers with you. In my opinion, the key focus should be on creating and developing a league. They should allocate funds to establish the league, form more clubs, and promote the league as much as possible. Right now, they have four or five clubs, so they're already at a stage where they can start running a league.

Creating the league will help build the overall value of amputee football in Ukraine. League events can serve as a powerful promotional tool to grow the sport and attract more attention. Since international events are currently difficult to organize in Ukraine, a strong national league can fill that gap and drive momentum. If they manage to involve major football clubs, it will make things much easier. The connection with big clubs brings visibility, resources, and fan support, which can significantly accelerate growth.

The current situation in Ukraine presents a unique opportunity because of the context with soldiers and veterans. This is a defining moment in their history, and I would recommend allocating resources not only to the development of clubs and leagues but also to strong promotional efforts. In Poland, the federation supports the clubs through sponsorships. We work to secure sponsorships at the federation level, and part of those funds are used to assist the clubs. Currently, all the coaches are paid by the clubs. This is part of the professionalization process. Initially, coaches volunteered because they simply wanted to help and support the sport. But now, as the clubs have grown and budgets have increased, they're able to compensate coaches for their time and expertise. Most of the clubs in Poland now also provide small payments to players. While only a few top players earn significant amounts, this is still a big change from the early days when everyone played simply for the love of the game. The shift toward professionalism is clear.

Future Outlook

12. What advice would you give to the Ukrainian Football Association to set up a successful amputee football program?

My advice would be to focus heavily on developing clubs and leagues. They can collaborate with major football clubs, which can significantly elevate amputee football in the country. Integrating amputee football teams into these big clubs will provide access to resources, fan bases, and promotional support. At the beginning, it's also important to leverage the promotional value of top players from these major clubs. For example, in Poland, one of our early successes was arranging joint training sessions between our national football team and our amputee football team. This was a turning point. When mainstream players and officials witnessed amputee football in action, they realized it truly is football—a dynamic, engaging, and visually striking sport. This kind of event not only promotes amputee football but also changes perceptions. Seeing it live is often a revelation for people, and it helps establish the sport as a serious discipline. Strategically, however, the focus should be on building a robust league and supporting clubs. These foundational elements will drive the sport's growth and ensure long-term sustainability.