

Champions on Crutches: Palestinians Form First Amputee Football Team in Gaza

The founder of the Palestine Amputee Football Association hopes to form a national team and compete in international competitions

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Featured image: Members of the “Champions Team” from the Palestine Amputee Football Association at training (MEE/Mohammed Asaad)

When he was just nine years old, Ibrahim Khattab lost his left leg during Israel’s 2014 “[Protective Edge](#)” military operation against Gaza. The 50-day assault left over 2,100 Palestinians dead, most of them civilians.

Now 13-year-old Khattab is the youngest member of Gaza’s first amputee football team, established in March this year.

“The past four years were harsh. It was not easy for me to cope with my new condition, but now I am proud that I play with all these men who are much older than me,” he said.



Image on the right: Ibrahim Khattab says he is “proud that I play with all these men who are much older than me and yet I sometimes manage to compete with them” (MEE/Mohammed Asaad)

Khattab said that what he went through in the aftermath of the Israeli attack was “unbearable”.

He and his friends were playing football in front of his home in the Deir al-Balah refugee camp in the southern Gaza Strip when he was hit by an Israeli drone. He immediately fainted and was transferred to the nearest hospital. When he woke up a few hours later, he found out he had lost his left leg.

"The explosion was massive, and it happened before I could run," he recalled. "I did not realise what was happening, I just remember that I saw my leg bleeding then I slept and woke up in the hospital a few hours later."

Khattab was nervous about going back to school at first.

"I was afraid my friends would not accept me anymore," he said. "I used to run and play on the street all day. Now my parents are always afraid something bad will happen to me if I run or hang out alone."

But Khattab has come a long way since then. He says that Monday, the day the team meets for training, has become his favourite day of the week.

"I get to meet my new friends here. Joining the team has made me confident about my body and abilities again. I love the support my coach and friends give me."



Ibrahim Khattab says Monday are his favourite day of the week because it is the day the team meets for training (MEE/Mohammed Asaad)

He said he dreams of travelling to represent Palestine in international games.

The football team of 13 amputees, dubbed "the Champions Team," meets once a week for a three-hour training session.

They aim to compete in international championships by challenging their current situations and breaking common stereotypes about the disabled.

Ten of the 13 members on the team suffered amputations due to injuries sustained from Israel's [three military operations](#) targeting the Gaza Strip between 2008-14. Others were victims of shelling incidents that have occurred sporadically since the beginning of the [blockade](#) Israel imposed on the strip in 2007.



For Noaman Abushamla, the association's manager, the initiative is a resistance tool for Palestinians to challenge the occupation (MEE/Mohammed Asaad)

As a result of Israel's "Operation Protective Edge" in the summer of 2014 alone, 1,100 people have been left with permanent disabilities, including 100 amputations.

More recently, since the beginning of the Great Return March protests, Gaza doctors have performed [32 amputations](#), 27 of which were on lower limbs, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO).

Tensions have soared in Gaza since 30 March, when Israel met largely peaceful mass protests near the fence separating Israel from Gaza with lethal force, killing at least 133 Palestinians. There have been no Israeli fatalities.

Gaza has been suffering a humanitarian crisis as a result of the Israeli-imposed blockade. According to the World Health Organisation, [1.2 million](#) people lack adequate access to healthcare.

Common goals

Wahid Rabah, the oldest member of the team, lost his right leg during an Israeli military operation in 2006 dubbed "[Summer Rain](#)," which was launched after an Israeli soldier was captured and taken into Gaza. The attack left more than 240 Palestinians dead, including 48 children.

Over the years, the 42-year-old has tried to find different ways of coping with his disability and in March he received a call from the founder of the [Palestine Amputee Football Association](#) (PAFA) – founded that same month – asking whether or not he would be

interested in joining the first amputee football team in Gaza.

“It took me three years to start coping by enrolling myself in local sport clubs and playing different sports, like sitting volleyball and football. Then the founder of this association called me and suggested that I join the team, and I said, why not?” he explained.

Image below: Islam Amoun has not let the loss of his arm stop him from playing football (MEE/Mohammed Asaad)



In July 2006, Rabah, a national security officer at the time, said he was hit by an Israeli drone, while he was on duty in the Bureij refugee camp.

“I can never forget the date, 19 July,” Rabah said. “I got injured and lay on the ground. When my colleague took off his shirt and tied it on my leg, I knew at that moment that I was going to lose it forever,” he recalled.

Rabah’s right leg was amputated due to severe damage to his bones and tissue. He usually uses a prosthetic leg but does without it on the football pitch to abide by the association’s rules, which allow players to use only crutches, since not all amputee players have prosthetic legs. The goal keeper must have a disability in his upper limbs while the rest of the players must have a disability in the lower limbs, among other rules.

Rabah believes his decision to join the team helped him realise that there are others that suffer similar disabilities to him and that he was not so different.

“Losing part of your body is not easy,” he said. “But getting to know people whose cases are similar to yours is very encouraging. This is why I have decided to stay with this team.”

A level playing field

A familiar figure on the sidelines of the pitch is Fouad Abu Ghalioun, the founder and chairman of PAFA, who supervises the team’s weekly training session.

Abu Ghalioun said he decided to create the amputee football team in Gaza after being inspired by the spirit shown by players in the European Amputee Football Championship (EAFF) in [October 2017](#).

"[I] thought to myself, if the idea is implemented in Europe where amputees have access to proper medical treatment and enjoy all their rights, then it is a must to start it in Gaza where victims of Israeli attacks are forgotten and left with no hope," Abu Ghalioun told Middle East Eye.

"I immediately called some friends and proposed the idea. They supported the initiative and started gathering information on what is needed to form such teams, who can join, and the kind of crutches used by players."

Abu Ghalioun spent five months working to bring the idea to life and said it is always a challenge to initiate such projects in Gaza.

The first obstacle was a lack of resources needed to fund the project, which included securing a football pitch and buying special crutches for the players.



Though the players do not have enough resources or equipment yet, they meet weekly for training
(MEE/Mohammed Asaad)

"It was also hard to convince the amputees, the majority of which did not accept their condition, to [accept] their disabilities and play football using only one leg," he said.

The Deir al-Balah Municipality opens its pitch for the team to practise once a week, however, the players should practise at least twice a week in a fully equipped football pitch, which must include bleachers, dressing rooms and toilets.

According to Abu Ghalioun, the players require special sturdy crutches that cost at least \$100 each. There are other costs as well, such as renting a football pitch and the cost of transporting the players who come from different areas in Gaza to the pitch in the central Gaza Strip, all of which may total an estimated \$10,000 a year in running expenses for the club.

Big dreams

Image on the right: Naji Naji lost his leg when he was 15 years old, after stepping on an explosive device in the Deir al-Balah refugee camp (MEE/Mohammed Asaad)



The 13 players hope to one day make it to the international [Paralympic Games](#).

“It would be a dream come true, not only for the team, but for all persons with disabilities in Gaza, if we manage to represent our country in international games,” said 26-year-old Naji Naji, as he took a break from practice. He lost his leg when he was 15 years old, after stepping on an explosive device in the Deir al-Balah refugee camp.

“I was walking in the street when an explosion suddenly struck. I immediately fell on the ground and my left leg was gone,” Naji recalled.

“You can see these crutches we are using are not made for sport. They bend and break most of the time. We do not have enough resources and equipment for training, but we are confident that we can make it despite everything.”

Notwithstanding the lack of resources, Naji wishes this project had been initiated a long time ago.

“The coaches are teaching us to run as fast as we can when we were afraid to even walk alone,” Naji said. “I hope we can train every day. It makes me feel alive.”

Abu Ghalioun says he hopes to form an additional four amputee teams from different governorates in the Gaza Strip within the next few months so they can compete with one another. In this way they can form a national team that will be able to compete at the international level. In these teams, he is also aiming to include players who also lost their limbs while participating in the Great Return March.

“We already have two teams that will start training in the next two weeks, including one for children with disabilities entitled ‘Hope and Future’ that will be given special training to help children cope with their condition,” he said.

Resistance tools

Mahmoud al-Naouq, the administrative manager of PAFA, lost both of his legs in two different incidents during the 2014 Israeli attack on Gaza.

According to al-Naouq, after an Israeli warplane targeted his home in Deir al-Balah, he was immediately transferred to the Shuhada al-Aqsa Hospital near his home, where doctors had to amputate his left leg as shrapnel completely damaged his bones. A few days later, al-Naouq says he lost his other leg after Israeli warplanes targeted the hospital where he was recovering.

According to al-Naouq, the first training session took place on Land Day, which coincided with the beginning of the Great Return March protests. [Land Day](#) commemorates the day when Israeli forces killed six Palestinians during protests against land confiscation in 1976.

“While the occupation usually portrays Palestinians as advocates for violence and death, this initiative came to reflect our desire to live rather than get killed,” al-Naouq said.

“The amputee team has given the players another chance to feel normal again,” said al-Naouq. “After feeling left out for years, this initiative teaches them how to play football with only one leg, but also helps them live with their disabilities.”

For Noaman Abushamla, the association’s manager, such initiatives are resistance tools for the Palestinians in the besieged enclave to “challenge the occupation and prove they still exist despite all attempts to marginalise them”.

“Our message is to voice these victims’ demands,” Abushamla said. “You see they are clinging to life, and it is our duty to show the world what they are capable of doing, instead of what they cannot do.”

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