



Following his recent retirement, as a result of difficulties brought about by repeated concussions, Acquired Brain Injury Ireland is proud to announce John Fogarty as our new ambassador for the organisation.

Speaking about his new position Fogarty says 'I am delighted to be an ambassador for Acquired Brain Injury Ireland, since my first encounter with the organisation I can see that the work they do is both beneficial and admirable; an organisation I am proud to be associated with, and to speak on behalf of'.

In an effort to get to know John better, he shares his story with us

## **John Fogarty – Felt it, Lived it, knows it...**

### **'It affects every facet of your life. It takes from you. I'm a different person when this is bad'**

When I would arrive into work at Leinster on a Monday morning it was pretty much always with a smile on my face. Not that I considered it work.

One of the crappiest things about having to stop playing rugby is that I'm going to have to find a real job and join the real world. As a rugby player you're kind of cut off from that a bit. And man have I loved that separation!

Even if I hadn't been involved in rugby for the last 11 seasons, I still would have been cheerful first thing in the morning because that's the way I am. So it's important to start this story on a positive note. How many fellas dream of being capped for their country? We all do, but very few of us actually get our hands on one. I'm on the outer limits of Ireland's international brigade but I'm there. And I have medals to show for my efforts: a Celtic League with Munster; a Heineken Cup with Leinster.

Most of all I have friends. You can't really explain what it's like to stand shoulder to shoulder with somebody in the heat of an incredibly intense battle, and know that they won't run out on you. It's a special bond. And when the final whistle goes the crack is unbelievable. Professional rugby means you can't party like the old days, but don't believe that there isn't incredible crack.

A dressing room is such a special place to be. Not just on match days. Poxly cold and wet Monday mornings as well. And I've been lucky enough to be fit for most of my career. So many lads have shoulders and knees reconstructed, but even though I'm a front-row forward I've come through that almost unscathed.

Am I grateful? Hugely. You can't believe how lucky I consider myself to have been a part of all this, to have shared the things I've shared with lads in Munster and Connacht and Leinster. I've captained Ireland A. And I'm not going away.

Rugby is still my life. I have an enormous passion for it. I've done some coaching and am keen to do a lot more. I have a ton of experience to share. This is a sport that's only

going up. People love rugby because of the spectacle, and in Ireland I think we're not too bad at it.

So it's important for me as a person to get that out there. To say thank you to the people who have helped me in my career, the supporters who have had kind words to say after I've given it my all out on the field. I'm blessed to have been involved, and I'm looking forward to the next chapter.

And I appreciate the way Leinster and the IRFU have dealt with my contract. They have been patient and understanding and it will help me now with the next stage of my life. So bring it on!

Part of the reason I'm writing this, though, is to close the lid on the playing side of the box. It's a mental thing: once I've spoken about it, then it's out there and there's no going back. I've been dodging the truth on this, looking for ways to hang on. Hopefully it will highlight an issue that has got me into trouble. And the truth is that I'm in a bit of trouble at the minute.

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I'll start at the finish. In Stadio Monigo in Treviso in September, half an hour down the road from Venice, I got one bang on the head too many. I call them bangs. Others would call them concussions.

Afterwards, Arthur Tanner, the Leinster doc, said to me that I needed to consider it. It came from him. I was leaving for the bus after the game and was still a bit zonked and he came over to me. 'Johnny,' he says, 'you need to start thinking about this: is it the best thing to be getting bangs?' It shocked me. 'Jesus Christ, Arthur!' I got on the bus.

Afterwards, it started to sink in for the first time that something was not right, that this was going on a bit longer. After the game I was a bit like a zombie but even in the airport I felt anxious. I started to get panicky. I started to get more symptoms than I had previously: very sensitive to noise and light. So I said I'd be honest with my symptoms when I go back. Take some time. I knew I needed that much because before you wouldn't be honest with yourself about that. I had a bad night the next night as well.

I remember just before it happened. I always remember just before the impact, and then nothing. Lukey Fitzgerald had come round the corner and taken an inside pass and I was running a diagonal line on him. Sean O'Brien was inside me. And I was roaring at Lukey to pass. And obviously he was going to pass to Sean O'Brien and not me. I was there: 'Yes Lukey, hit me, hit me!' I remember everything about it: Lukey turned and looked at me and went to pass. Then Boom! Lights out. Completely black.

I woke up on the pitch thinking it was so strange that there was grass on my eye. It freaked me out for a second. One minute I'm playing rugby, the next -- bring in grass? It was like there was complete separation between the two. I got up onto my hands and there was blood coming out of my mouth. I could hear the doc: 'John, it's Arthur here'. I got up on one knee. Gather yourself, gather yourself. It was close to half-time. I looked round and saw that we were attacking their line and I tried to get away and get back in the game. Arthur told me to cop on and stay where I was. He held onto me for a small while. Then he said: 'We're going in with this.'

I remember being in the dressing room and the lights were really bright. I wasn't thinking anything for ages. Then I remember thinking: 'I can't believe I got a poxy bang'. So I was worried about bangs I suppose. It felt like I'd been kicked in the face, or someone had hit me with a rock. It must have been a rock, I thought. I couldn't have been asleep so fast. They all came in at half-time and there was a team talk and a bit of shouting and I was looking at the floor and looking up and looking back.

Then I was asked if I was all right. 'Yeah, I'm fine, I'm fine'. I put some water in my mouth and spat a bit of stuff out, put my gumshield in and went out. Ten minutes later, I got another bang. Another poxy bang. I'm not well up on this Second Impact Syndrome stuff and how you're more likely to get a second incident after the first. As far as I was concerned, it was another poxy bang. Last season I read a story in this newspaper about concussion, and the questions raised worried me at the time. I looked up a few things afterwards. Then put them away. I remember thinking it was something I might talk about when I was finished. Well, I'm finished now.

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Am I worried now? Yeah, a little bit. I don't want to be symptomatic. I'm not a nice person when I'm like that. I can be sharp with Katie-May, our little girl. I can be cross with Sinéad, my wife. I can be sensitive to light and sound. I don't want to go out. I don't want to do anything. You almost slip into a bit of depression. You can be quite sad and upset. It's horrible. It affects every facet of your life. If you did your cruciate ligament, you mightn't be able to kick a ball but this really affects every little thing about your being, about you as a person. It takes from you. I'm a different person when I'm bad. You're entirely different. It changes you. I'm naturally a very happy and optimistic type of guy, but when this is bad it's awful.

This is a good spell for me. Prior to it I was feeling really good the previous Saturday and Sunday and we were down home in Tipperary. And on the way home I said to Sinéad: 'I'm really good. I'm feeling great'. And it had been in the middle of really bad headaches. And that Sunday night I woke up at two o'clock with another really bad one. 'I don't believe this.'

I'm doing a Masters in Sports Management and I'd planned to go and do a module in college the next day. 'I can't get out of bed, Sinéad. I can't move'. Couldn't do it. We have blackout blinds now and I spent pretty much the entire day in bed.

I would never sleep during the day. But when this is bad the only thing you can do is get into your room and shut the entire world outside. Close your eyes and go asleep. Hopefully.

The worst is when you get up after a day of sleep, you've already got a headache. And you're tired. And you're emotional. And you're narky. And you're frightened because you're like this. I remember maybe a year ago and I was three weeks into a bout of this and I was getting panic attacks. I sat on the bed after a day of sleeping and I was freaking out going: 'There's something fucking wrong with me. I'm after doing something to myself'.

If I'd a gaping wound in my leg, I could point to it and go: 'Man -- look at my leg!' But I can't. I remember worrying that there was something wrong with me, that there was something wrong with my brain. Then after another day or two it passed. And

I told myself I'd be okay. It was a few headaches. Just rest your head and you'll be fine, rest up and you'll be okay. And it did get better. And then I was perfect and I felt that way for a long time. But it is horrible. Not just for me but for my family as well.

Last year at some stage I knew I was getting a lot of bangs. They weren't all classed as concussions. I was getting 'knocked'. How do you define it? When have you got it? Do you have it if you're knocked out? If it is there were seven or eight times that season when I got a bang and the lights went out. I was putting it all down to bad technique.

At the time, Kurt McQuilkin was our defence coach and he gave me extra sessions. He warned me I was going to kill myself if I kept getting my head the wrong side of the tackle. When we were playing Scarlets once the analysis had been all about stopping their number eight David Lyons, that when he took the ball up he wouldn't change his line so we had to get up and cut him off at the legs before he got a head of steam up. He came flying up and -- bang -- I was in there head first. Lights out.

In March of this year, I was sent to see a neurologist in the Mater. I'd failed a load of cognitive tests where they measure how sharp you're operating mentally. I wasn't too good. I was thinking about how flippant players are about concussion. Among us the attitude was always: 'You're grand, you're grand'. If your leg was hanging off they'd be: 'So sorry man.' But players' attitude with concussion is to shake it off and get on with it.

After the Treviso game, I went in for the standard medicals with Leinster. We do them after every game. I admitted I was not good. Not good at all. Couldn't sleep, so I was awake a lot. But then when I would fall asleep I'd nearly oversleep and be really tired all through the day. Angry and irritable. A real pain in the arse to be around at home. 'Sinéad, I feel like shit. The sun is annoying me. The noise is annoying me, so the only place I can be now is in a dark room.'

They listened to my symptoms and told me not to train and to do a cog test on the Monday morning. By midweek, there was no change. I was still fucked. Felt like Sinéad was going to divorce me. The medics told me to stay away. By the weekend, the sensitivity to light had improved but I was still angry. Very narky. And I wouldn't be a narky person at all.

I went in to see one of our doctors at the next medical and he shocked the life out of me. I think our medics are great and they've always looked out for me. He said something similar to what Arthur had been saying. I got a bit emotional and upset. 'I don't believe you're fucking saying this to me!' Went to see the neurologist again. By this stage I was being told by two or three doctors that it was time to retire.

I went away for five days to try and get headache-free and try to think about it all. That was the process from Treviso to sitting in here on my own looking out the window and realising it was all over. Is it finished?

I'd said to the neurologist inside in the meeting there that when I'm good I'm nearly perfect. When I'm bad it's obviously bad. I brought Sinéad into the meeting because of course she'd have an opinion on how I'd been over the last six months and she's seen

how more tired I am, and that I'm quicker to anger. We had a good chat and I told the neurologist that in three, four, five weeks' time I could be perfect. My body's good. I've loads of experience. I can play rugby. He said: 'Yes, but John, there are people around the world who are symptomatic for months and years'. And it made loads of sense.

When you think about it practically, if I was my brother or my son, I'd be telling myself you need to do this, this and this: retire, retire, retire.

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From the moment I met Michael Cheika I liked him. Here was a guy who wanted to win. I had heard horror stories about him but he had a real passion for it. 'I'm here for two years and if we don't win something, then fuck it I'm out of here.' That's the way he was. He bawled me out of it one day for picking my nails. 'Are you smiling at me?'

Soon after I went there in 2008 they were getting a roasting in the media when Castres beat them the week after having been hammered in Dublin. I wasn't in the match squad then but felt for the lads with the abuse they were getting in the press. It became my team then.

When I'd go home to Tipperary, I'd be arguing to the last breath to defend Leinster. I just dived in. It reignited everything that I find good about rugby: having a cause to fight for. I knew a few of the lads before I arrived and I thought it was a brilliant group to be involved in. I'd be going in every morning thinking this was great.

Going there was the best thing ever for myself and Sinéad as a couple as well. She's from Kildare and we're so much closer to her home now. People don't just get up and drive to Galway and at times we had felt a bit isolated over there. It's not a place you drive through and drop in for tea.

From that Christmas onwards I was hating the outside world again. Perfect! Maybe I need a cause because that's what got me going in Connacht when I moved there from Munster. The whole underdog thing, and I was going to show everyone. Except that we were getting kicked all over the place. But rugby in Ireland was really growing from about 2003 onwards and my passion for it followed at the same time. Connacht had just been saved from the axe when a whole glut of us arrived there. It was great. I had five seasons there and got Ireland A out of it. Captained them in a Churchill Cup. Captained Connacht for a season as well.

Things went a bit sour at the end. My form wasn't brilliant and maybe I found it all too hard, finishing bottom of the league pretty much the whole time. If you didn't give a damn it wasn't tough -- you could just collect the salary, and enjoy the lifestyle doing something you loved. But it bothered me. There were a few times when I was left on the bench in games when I could have been brought on -- games where we were being hosed. And I had been captain the previous season. So I rang my agent John Baker and he got me sorted with Leinster.

After the lashing Leinster were getting in the media, I was so happy the way we came back and won the Heineken Cup. I'd enjoyed personal successes with Ireland A and won things with Cork Con but this was different. I love Leinster and I love rugby and that's why it's so hard to give it up.

When I moved to Leinster I'd already got a few bangs in the head but if it wasn't recorded as concussion at the time then it wasn't concussion. If I'd had a chronic hamstring in Connacht then that would have been passed on and the form would have said that it needed minding and monitoring, but I thought I was a perfect specimen. I used to slag other lads. 'I'm 30 and I'm perfect: never under the knife'. I broke an ankle once and did a few ribs but nothing serious. My shoulder got injected from time to time and my ankle needed to be strapped, and my knees are sore, but that's run of the mill. Me? I was fine when I landed in Dublin.

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I admitted to myself after the Toulouse game last season that there was something seriously wrong. There had been one scrum in that match where I passed out. I don't know if I was holding my breath. I don't remember what I was doing. They were putting us under enormous pressure and I knew that this was impacting on the game hugely. This was reflecting on us as a pack massively. We were all trying our best to fix the issue and I obviously have a weak head because I collapsed in a scrum, which is very dangerous when you think of it because you're not in control of yourself when you're falling. You can break anything.

The other fellas don't know you're collapsing. Thankfully I fell right. And I rolled right. I was bleeding out of my nose. I remember Shane Jennings talking to me that evening. 'Fogs, you were fucking spaced out for a couple of seconds.'

It sounds terrible: blood out of the nose and a bit of a shake. Maybe it was holding my breath that did it. I think I said that to the medics at the time when they came onto the pitch. They ask their questions and medically I must have been sound enough because I could remember the date and the day and all that stuff.

Sometimes when they ask you the first question you just tell them to go away and leave you alone. Maybe it was because you'd be playing for time. You'd be holding onto them for fear of falling over. But you gather yourself quite quick.

There was no big bang that day in Toulouse -- well a bit of bang but it didn't knock me out which I was delighted with. It was getting to that point: there'd be a bang in the head in a game and if it didn't knock me out I'd be delighted! I used to tell Sinéad as little as possible. She knew I got a bang that day in Toulouse but she didn't know I passed out. And obviously she knew I had to go and see a neurologist.

And she could see what had happened to my moods which caused arguments. From then on I had to be more honest with her but she was already pretty worried. She was upset. And my mother was the same: 'Will you just finish this game! Feck rugby. Give it up!'

I told Sinéad at the end of last season it was hard not to get a bang, and I was trying to figure out how not to get them.

That's why I was so pissed off about how the Treviso thing happened. I watched it back on video and the number eight just glanced off me on the way to tackling Sean O'Brien. I went down in a heap. We talked about it over the summer. I went on the tour with Ireland and got two presents: one was a cap; the other was a clean bill of health. I was delighted.

When I got back from the Ireland tour we went away on holiday to Portugal and it came back again. I had done a little bit of training one day -- just a run, not much -- and woke up the next day with a cracking headache.

That went on for two days. It worried me and it worried Sinéad. No bangs -- nothing. I don't know if it was the bit of training had sent all this blood rushing through my brain or whatever. It went away after two days but we were both concerned. I knew at that stage that I had to be really careful, but there was no way I was going to finish.

When I read that line now I realise how crazy it seems. Being careful? I'm a paid-up member of the 'concussion is a state of mind club' and suddenly I'm telling myself to be careful.

It had always been my goal to finish the right way, to have the 'see you later.' To have Sinéad and Katie-May, my mam and family at the match. Making a big deal of the last game was always part of the vision. I had signed a two-year contract last season and they wouldn't have given it to me if I'd looked like a player who was finished. I wanted to get out as a 12-season veteran turning 35. A night out and a celebration of the fact that that part of my life had wound up reasonably well. I wanted to win a competition with Leinster as a starting player, not coming off the bench. Sinéad had said to me during the summer: 'You've been capped; you've a Heineken Cup medal; you've had a great career. You've played more Magners League games than any other Irish player! Would you not consider wrapping it up?'

I don't want to sound greedy but I wanted more. A year ago I got a headache from all the to-ing and fro-ing around the Australia game when Jerry Flannery was injured and I thought I was going to get in. I was like a dog about to get a treat only for it to be taken away again.

I felt at the time that my chance had gone. And that they didn't trust me enough to put me in there. If they didn't see a future for me, I wasn't so sure either. I barely got onto the pitch then in the New Zealand game in the summer, but I'm very proud of the fact that I did. And when I'm telling the story in 10 years' time, I'll have started that game.

Where I'll be by then I'm not sure. Mostly I want to be symptom-free. I desperately want to be still involved in rugby at that point. By then I know things will have changed around concussion. I know players will take it more seriously because there will be other people in the same boat as me. It will be acceptable to say that you're concussed and you're taking a break. I'm sure there are others gone before me who we just don't know about. And there will be others to follow. This isn't going away. At least not quietly.