

SSE AIRTRICITY LEAGUE

The physio talks to me more than he does to his wife

By NEIL O'RIORDAN

LUKE BYRNE is looking forward to tackling the opposition again after spending much of last season spying on them.

Byrne's first league start for Shamrock Rovers in 2016 ended in disaster.

The Hoops left-back found himself upended by Cork City's Steven Beattie ten minutes into a 2-0 defeat at Turner's Cross in April.

Byrne tore his cruciate and lateral ligament, which ruled him out for the remainder of the season.

This week, he was up to 95 per cent of his body weight on the anti-gravity treadmill – which means he should be back running on grass before the end of the month.

A return to action in time for the league's kick-off on February 24 is touch and go but, so far, everything has gone according to plan for the 23-year-old.

Byrne told SunSport: "When I got the injury, I thought I would have surgery straight away but I was told I had to wait five weeks.

"The straighter your leg is, the greater your chances of success are so I had to work on my hamstrings twice a day, particularly as I was getting a hamstring graft.

"But I hit my goals two weeks earlier than planned, which was a big boost.

"When I went in, the surgeon told me the chances of success and the chances of re-injury,

Says
LUKE BYRNE

depending on how long you rehabbed for.

"After the operation, he told me he was confident I would make a full recovery, which was a massive relief."

Byrne still has not seen footage of the tackle in Cork that ended his season before it had really started.

He revealed: "I was going away from goal, the ball was going out of play and all of my weight was on one leg.

"It was from behind so I didn't see it but whatever angle he caught me, it ended badly."

The ex-Bohemians defender had the security that his contract with the Hoops ran until the end of the 2017 season.

But Stephen Bradley has replaced Pat Fenlon as manager in the meantime, which leaves Byrne knowing he has to prove himself all over again.

He said: "I worked with Stephen as a coach but it's a fresh start for everyone.

"Trevor Clarke did very well last year at left-back, so it's not just a case of me saying I want to get fit and I'll be in the team.

"It's going to be a longer and tougher process than that.

"The main goal is just to get myself fit and take it from

there. We've been in the gym six days a week since the start of the month and I've been able to do all of that work, which is great, being part of the group again having done a lot of work on my own.

"I don't know how long it will be between me starting to run on the grass and being able to kick a ball again.

"But I can't wait to do it because it's been eight months since I have.

"But the club were very good to me. The physio Tony McCarthy probably talks to me more than he does to his wife!

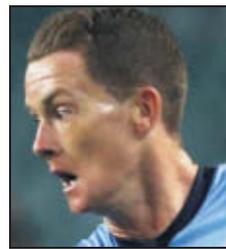
"And Bradser was very good at keeping me involved, giving me little jobs to do.

"I was at all of Rovers' home games but if they were down the country and I couldn't go because of my rehab, I'd go to another game in Dublin to watch a team we might be playing in a few weeks.

"It was good and gave me a different perspective.

"But I just want to get back playing now."

DON'T LUKE BACK . . .
Luke Byrne is hoping to bounce back for Rovers in 2017 after this year's long injury-enforced absence



O'NEILL . . . options

A green light from Brandon

By NEIL O'RIORDAN

SYDNEY FC'S Brandon O'Neill has revealed he is open to the idea of playing for Ireland.

Born in Perth after his parents Lorraine and Myles emigrated Down Under, the defensive midfielder spent part of his childhood in Rathfarnham.

And although he has been capped twice by Australia at Under-23 level, he is open to the idea of pulling on the green shirt.

O'Neill, 22, said: "It's a big aspiration of mine to play for Australia, growing up playing here.

"It'd be a massive achievement and an honour for myself and my family if I was able to represent the Socceroos one day.

"In saying that, I believe I have a lot of improvement and a lot of development left in me to make it at international level.

"I wouldn't have lived properly in Ireland but I spent a lot of time there.

"I've got an Irish passport and mum and dad both have it too.

"Ireland will always have a huge part in my heart because of my background and family there."

Asked by FourFourTwo magazine what he would do if called up by both countries, O'Neill said: "That'd be quite funny if that ever eventuated, if they came knocking, it'd be another massive honour to do that.

"It'd be a terribly tough decision, even if one country was to reach out, I'd take it with both hands."

O'Neill spent four years at fellow A-League side Perth Glory without establishing himself as a regular but has flourished since joining Sydney in May 2015.

Earlier this week, he signed a two-year extension to his contract.

Waghorn delivers

Hamilton.....1
Rangers.....2

MARTYN WAGHORN'S double at New Douglas Park helped Rangers cut Celtic's lead at the top of the Premiership to eight points.

Jason Holt and Waghorn combined to break Hamilton's resistance with the Englishman heading home Holt's cross right on the stroke of half-time.

Waghorn doubled the advantage on 57 minutes after he was teed up by Lee Wallace.

Hamilton did rally and pulled one back through Dougie Imrie with 13 minutes to go.

SETTING THE TONE . . .
physio Tony McCarthy has aided Byrne's recovery

