

# It's all in the state of mind: A reflection of my orthopaedic journey

Bart Day



Figure 1: In hospital after my accident.



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## Life can change in an instant

**J**ust before my 25th birthday I had a climbing accident (Figure 1). It left me with a leg that was an inch and a half shorter than the other and a rebuilt foot with limited movement and sensation. On the other side, an ankle that was basically bone on bone (Figure 2 & 3). By the time I was in my mid-thirties, I was married with two children and a career. I was walking with a stick, on ever increasing doses of pain killers and in severe discomfort that was getting more and more debilitating.

I only realised the profound impact these injuries would have on my life when the initial surgery had ceased and I had to come to terms with the fact that this was the new me. I had been extremely active, I ran, swam, climbed and snowboarded. I was a cocky, invincible twenty-something year old. After the accident, my life had changed.

I married soon after I was able to walk down the aisle unaided, had a family and got on with life the best I could. As my children got older, and my condition deteriorated, the impact of my injuries became apparent. My children, like most children, were active. They played football, rugby and hockey. They ran, swam, cycled, climbed, and did gymnastics and trampolining, everything that I'd dreamed of being able to do with them. I now found myself on the side-line.

I could swim and cycle, but I couldn't kick a ball or run. Physically and mentally, I felt as though I were far older than my years, and it got me down. Looking back now, I realise that I wasn't being the dad or husband I had wanted to be when I was growing up, and my children were having to make excuses for me to their friends at a time when they just wanted to fit in.



Figure 2: Severe arthritis of my ankle with nerve injury.



Figure 3: Deformed right ankle and arthritis of my left ankle.

### A fork in the road

After a change of jobs took us to another part of the country, I was taken on by a new consultant. He and I spoke at length about what I had wanted to achieve, and the options available to me. We discussed three main avenues:

- 1) Alternative pain management
- 2) Reconstruction
- 3) Amputation

I had never really liked the thought of taking tablets long term and having been on a wide selection of drugs over the previous ten

years, this wasn't a route that appealed to me. The reconstruction option felt like a lot of disruption to try something which was, at that time, not entirely reliable, so an amputation was something that I had to seriously consider. I went home to talk it through with my friends and family.

As expected, there were differing opinions of what an amputation would mean to me, and to us as a family, and in hindsight, these fit pretty closely to the usual outlook of those who offered them. Everything from "this is terrible, your life will be over" through to "it's great, you'll never get a cold foot again" and a lot of abstainers.

would never be able to wear a limb, I would have sores, and blisters and infections, and I would possibly even shorten my lifespan!

I'm pleased to be able to report that I never actually saw that consultant ever again, and the nurses, physios and prosthetists were far more akin to my consultant and his 'this is the best decision, and together we will make it work' attitude. We chose to go ahead with the amputation.

### The road less travelled

The surgery was relatively straightforward. I was admitted to hospital one morning, my consultant came with a black marker pen and drew an arrow on the correct leg (Figure 4). I went down to surgery and then woke up with everything done. He came to see me over the next couple of days and then I was discharged.

That night, as I bum-shuffled along the upstairs landing to kiss my children good night I realised that, I actually felt far less disabled with half a leg missing than I had with the mangled one. It was then I knew that this had been the right decision.

At this point, I will say that I had arranged for a car with hand controls through the Motability scheme, so I wasn't reliant on others for mobility. I was also, by now, a football coach for my son's U9's team and playing in a local band. I was more than just my injuries. They were part of me, but they didn't define me.

Six days after my amputation I was bowling with the family. Six weeks after the amputation, I was back at work. Ten weeks after the amputation I was walking.

Rehabilitation was challenging, but the team supporting my consultant and the team at the Artificial Limb centre were completely aligned with what was best for me and how I was going to get there. The prosthetists >>



Figure 4: My leg before amputation surgery.

My wife and I had a second conversation with my consultant and one of his colleagues, and both assured me that if they were in my situation, at my age with my level of health, this would be their choice. I'd be up and walking within a few months and wondering why I'd not had this done years ago. They booked me an appointment with the consultant at the artificial limb centre to talk about rehab.

Of all the moments in my life relating to this accident, I don't think anything has traumatised me as much as that appointment. I guess, his job was to make sure I was absolutely serious about the amputation and I was going in to it with my eyes well-and-truly open. I came out of his office with a portents of doom ringing in my ears. I would be confined to a wheelchair for the rest of my life, I





Figure 5: My new leg.

In the past, to other healthcare providers, I've been a patient, or I've been a case or I've been an NHS number. With my current team I am Bart Day. I have a family. I have a life outside of the sterile walls of whichever medical facility I might be in. Being recognised as me, and being treated as me, I knew that I was still me, and that, I think, was pretty fundamental in the successful outcome of my journey (Figure 7).

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**3. Document things.** Even if it's only a few lines a day in an old notebook, write things down. When did you stop taking pain killers? When did you take your first steps? When did you feel unable to even get out of bed? I did this quite a lot, and ten years later, it's really empowering to look back and see what I went through and how strong I really was even though at the time I probably didn't think I was. Also, if you can face it, take photos of your progress. I've got so few photos after my initial accident because I refused to let them be taken. Now, I wish my family had ignored my wishes.

Five things to share and reflect upon having been through trauma and an amputation are:

**1. Try to keep your life as normal as possible.** I know, that sounds silly. But although it'll feel as if everything is different, try to keep your life as normal as possible. Cook meals, spend time reading to the kids, help them with homework, do some housework. Just because you're in a wheelchair, it doesn't mean that you've lost the use of your other limbs. If it's your turn to cook supper, then cook supper. It gives you something to think about other than the injury and surgeries.

**2. Keep busy for a reason.** If you sit and wallow in self-pity, it'll be a long, hard road to recovery. You have to have a 'thing' that needs to be done every day, and make sure the 'thing' you do has a purpose. How about these as ideas?

- a. Take up a hobby.
- b. Learn a language.
- c. Sort out Lego.

**4. Don't take your frustration out on those who care about you.** Remember, the vast majority of people you know won't ever have been through what you're going through, but that doesn't mean they don't care. There will be many times when you just want everyone to leave you alone, but they are probably feeling as scared as you are. Most people are nice and want to help. So if you see them as interfering busybodies, then that probably says more about you than them.

**5. If you want it to, it will get better.** This point initially didn't have the first five words, but I totally believe that I am the person I am today, as active as I am today and doing what I do today because I really wanted it to happen. I know amputees who have never walked on their legs because it's been too tough, and I don't doubt that I think I've had it easy, but in the words of Walter D Wintle, *“If you think you're beaten, you are... it's all in the state of mind.”* ■

took plaster casts, had fittings and gave me a leg (Figure 5). The physios taught me how to walk and deal with my new limb. My consultant and his team made sure the stump healed and was ready to carry me. I can honestly say that ever since my amputation, even on the rare occasions when I have been unable to wear my leg due to sores or blisters, not once have I doubted that it was the right decision.

It's now 12 years later. Since my amputation, I've also had my left ankle replaced and once again, everyone involved in my care before, during and afterwards, knew who I was, what my ambitions were and how they were going to make sure I achieved them (Figure 6).



Figure 6: Achieving my ambitions.



Figure 7: Back to doing what I love.