

Reflections on a Knee Injury

I had been running quite merrily with the Harriers for nearly ten years. I wasn't a 'proper' runner having had few niggles, and no injuries to speak of! Then one day, I noticed that coming down stairs was best performed sideways. Well, as an athlete - doing about 50K a week - what should I expect? You shouldn't be able to touch your toes anymore - the suppleness in your legs goes with those big thigh muscles, doesn't it? The condition crept up on me, and consciously the deterioration in my knees had not registered. My left knee was already knackered before Theively Pike fell race, 2003. I had detected something wrong - odd sharp pains in the back of my leg when trying to stretch before the race. Ah well, take it easy, I thought. And I did - not much pain .. till the knee ballooned up with swelling that evening. There followed 3 months of swelling - rest - run - swelling - rest - run - etc until it registered that I had a long term problem. Thanks to club colleagues I sought professional help.

Consultation no. 1. A Physio lecturer. A university colleague was the first to take a look, with some good advice: do gym exercises on the muscles around my knee, and get referred to a hospital specialist. I never understood why people went *inside* to exercise in a gym - what were they doing in there? Posing? But I reluctantly joined and started 'working out'. Yes, the gym work prevented me from 'crawling up the walls'. I could work on a 'PB' on the stepper and on the rowing machine, and come away after a session feeling good. My knee began to feel better too, partly the exercises, partly avoiding going for runs. Now I knew why people went to the gym - they were all runners with leg injuries, toiling in a state of purgatory until they could get out again.

Consultation no. 2: Hospital Specialist. Working out for 3 months had now returned me to being fit, and coming into a place full of sick people felt wrong - what was I doing there? The specialist fitted well in hospital - he was sick - an obvious heavy smoker, with an awful throaty cough. He wheezed up to my leg and felt my meniscus. No swelling. Nothing. What was I doing there? With the minimum number of words he confirmed something was wrong under my meniscus. The stuff underneath it gets irritated and starts the swelling. I was given a paper hand-out with pictures of a wiry hermaphrodite in various exercising positions, and that was it. I did the exercises, started running, but to my horror the swelling started again.

Consultation no. 3. Commercial Physio. The physio spent the first half of the 'introductory' session moving my meniscus around the top of my knee until the problem area was revealed with a cry of agony. The second half - more probing and more cries of agony. Well, there *was* something wrong with the stuff under my knee cap. Outcome: no course of physio would do any good (!) - I needed to persuade my GP to ask for hospital surgery.

Consultation no. 4. Knowledgeable GP. This was the low point. The GP looked at the reports from consultations 2 and 3. The message was simple: at my age I was too old to be running, there was no point in surgery, I might as well get used to it and give up (the GP had apparently). Time to throw out my anti-impact insoles, my knee support, my knee book, my glucosamine tablets...

The turning point came in the gym months later, over a year after the injury started. My left knee during leg extensions was weaker than my right - especially the all important 'VMO' muscle, the one on the inside of your leg that keeps the knee cap where it should be. In the gym I could *compare* the strengths of both knee muscles and tell when they were equal. I had to keep exercising until my left was as strong as my right. *Only then should I start running again.* And that's what I did, and the swelling stopped returning!

So (I hope) that is the end of my story. Its 2 years now since it all started. And I've had about 18 months off. What lessons to be learned? Well, don't give up! And do other training apart from running - gym for example, and don't laugh at people in them. They are all just waiting for the chance to get out and start running again.

Lee McCluskey