

10-7
by Eric Sandy
Del Mar

Out of order. No longer in service. Dinged up. Down time.

When your line of work is physical, and the body quits cooperating, it can be miserable. Even when the pain is not that extreme, the shock of not being able to perform our duties and have fun the way we're used to, can be debilitating. Just as frustrating as the actual injury is the re-habilitation. So for what its worth, here's one man's story. Here are the lessons I relearned when recuperating from knee surgery.

Like so many of us who have frolicked in and around the ocean for so long, I started to believe I was bulletproof. All that salt had preserved my aging bones and nothing could keep me from playing till I was 80. Or so I thought.

The first clue that the knee was not quite right was when the post-workout swelling didn't subside even after all the ice and ibuprofen I could find. Even slowing down from my already pedestrian running pace would not let the knee repair itself. The physical therapist told me it was just wear and tear. It was all those late takeoffs, radical bottom turns and not-very-high leaps off the volleyball court that had finally taken their toll. So I tried yoga and swallowing supplements the names of which I could never pronounce.

I tried the chiropractor but all he could do was crack my back in fourteen different ways and then tell me that was somehow connected to my knee. I tried thinking very positive thoughts and visualizing a healthy knee. And still the ole knee throbbed. After having two different orthopedic surgeons pull, poke, yank and twist the knee asking such probing medical questions as "where does it hurt?" I realized I needed a picture. First I got the x-ray but that showed only a healthy knee. Finally it was the MRI, that spacey, noisy, grinding machine that shed the light on the source of the pain and swelling. "Large tear in the meniscus" was the diagnosis. And, the doc said, the only way to fix it was that dreaded "S" word, the surgery. The scope.

But providence smiled on me and his name was Patrick "Doc" Padilla, an accomplished athlete, an L.A. County lifeguard and thank goodness, one fine Orthopedic Surgeon.

The Doc used that tiny skill saw to hack out the torn part of my meniscus and voila, I was fixed. Well, at least I could go home, limping and bleary. The Doc estimated the recovery time to be between “two days and two months — it depends on you”! Well, does that sound like a challenge?

I left the crutches in my car. I figured the more time without them the better. After the first day, the local anesthetic wore off. Oh doctor! “Discomfort?” Is that what they call this? Where the hell is that Vicodin? But no, even though the heavy stuff kills the pain it leaves me feeling like a cabbage-head so, it’s back to the ice. And here’s the first revelation. Remember that R.I.C.E. stuff from 1st Aid 101? that twenty minutes on? Well, now they tell me, ice continually! for hours! They even have this fancy machine that pumps ice water through an ice pack rapped around the knee for hours at a time. The ice seems to work, or the swelling just goes away, but within two days I stagger back to work. At least, to the desk from where I can be slightly useful. My getting up and down the steep ladder to the office provides good entertainment for the crew. Those with a cruel sense of humor suggest I’m no slower than before. But at least I’m moving.

Movement is what it’s all about. The Doc sends me to physical therapy where some very cute young women put me through a myriad of medieval movements on strange machines that are supposed to make me stronger sooner. Even standing on one foot for any length of time seems like a great advance in agility. Until I remembered I couldn’t do that very well before the surgery. And, I pump iron. At least I move weights on the leg press - very light weights, many times, until the knee gets very sore, and then move it some more. And I walk. I walk on the beach, on the street, up and down stairs whenever and wherever I can, I walk.

Along with all the walking and lifting I stretch, do endless crunches and continue those weird but effective frog hops that just kill your quads after about five minutes. I also go through two ice packs at a sifting, still fighting that battle to keep down the inflammation.

After about two weeks of seemingly endless hopping, stretching, lifting and walking, I give myself a treat and go for a paddle. It’s a calm day and I’m only out for ten minutes but it’s such a reward to get back into the ocean. And, it makes the knee feel better! OK, it could just be that strange mental high, endorphin driven pain reliever or something but at this stage, I’ll take it.

Then on the horizon was a shining light, an achievable goal. It was only a five-mile race. But, it was all down hill! I can shuffle that far I figured. I can depend on “residual conditioning” I was told. That’s what older athletes tell each other when

they're out of shape and decide to try vigorous activity for the first time in a while. So I went for it.

I had managed to “walk” almost a mile four days after the surgery. Three weeks after the scope I had jogged almost two miles. Two weeks after that, my “mileage” was up to five very slow cautious miles on the beach. After every walk or run I'd ice. I'd stretch. And three times a week I was in the gym slowing lifting those weights. Then came race day. It had been forty days and forty nights since I hobbled out of Doc Padilla's office. He had cleared me for “full exercise” as long as I “listened” to my knee and if I felt any pain or noticed any swelling, stopped. The excitement of competing again carried me for the first two miles. My great training bro, Jack Ross, carried me for the next two miles. Then reality struck. I was gassed, whopped, bonked, done. The finish line looked like it was moving away from me but I'd come too far to stop now. Staggering to the end, I felt damn pleased to have finished the race. But the best feeling was in my legs. They were wobbly, tired, sore and aching. But that post-op knee felt good as new. Well, at least it felt just like the other one, old and tired. Most importantly, there was no swelling. And even the next day, the legs were still stinging from the lactic acid but no puffy knee!

Since that humble day of recovery, I've been able to run more, paddle more and even ride a wave or two. I still swim slowly, but I always did. I still can't jump very high —never could. I haven't lost much speed in the 10k but I never had it. What I have managed to do is to return to a relatively active life at a relatively advanced age. And so much thanks must go to Doc Padilla and his magic scope. Just imagine, if he can fix my old knee, think of the wonders he could work with people who have great athletic ability. Think of how he could create a whole team of exceptional lifeguard competitors. He could fix them with bionic body parts so they'd be unbeatable at everything from running to swimming to surf ski to paddleboard to beach flags. They would dominate! LACOLA would win the national championship in lifeguard competition! Naaa, he wouldn't do that!