**An Amazing Sport – An Even More Amazing Community**

The 26th April, 2021 is the date on which I passed out, fell, smashed my neck on the side of a cast iron bath, shattered a disk and partially severed my spinal cord which was trapped between 2 twisted and locked vertebrae. I was losing spinal fluid and I’ve since been told that I wasn’t expected to survive. Over the next 2 days, after 13 hours spread across 2 sessions in theatre for 2 major surgical procedures, I did manage to survive. I then spent over a week in intensive care with breathing tubes and wires and a plethora of other tubes stuck in every orifice as well as into some I never previously had. I was then told I would possibly be paralysed from the neck down for the rest of my life. Spinal cords do not heal and cannot be repaired. I could barely breathe unaided; I couldn’t swallow and I couldn’t move.

Everyone deals with these situations differently. Anger, self-pity, resignation, sadness and despair are all amongst the most common emotions. I chose to reject all of those, as I could see them achieving nothing positive and instead, I decided to be “reborn” into whatever the future held without ever looking back and without ever saying “I will never again be able to ?????” I determined to focus on what I could do and try to expand that range every day. I truly believed that I could train my brain to find new pathways to control my muscles. To what extent this strategy worked is still under debate as a group of neuro surgeons world-wide continue to evaluate my ongoing progress. So far, the only conclusion they have drawn is that the progress I have made is not medically possible.

When I was evicted from ICU both I and the staff were amazed by the number of cards and messages of support and encouragement from the bowls community. The friendly supportive ones, the “well that was really stupid” ones and the “from your Friends (and enemies) one. What I know is that every message helped to encourage me to improve. Pushing me to just one more repetition of a recently achieved movement and one more attempt at a new one.

With fantastic support from the hospital physio team at St George’s, all the team at Stanmore Spinal Unit and more recently at the David Weir Rehab Centre and with wonderful support from my wife and family, I have learnt to walk again and now to the untrained eye, I can pretty much pass as normal (or as close as I ever was). And that is exactly how I classify myself, there are no limits, there are no restrictions, there is no pain and there is no quarter asked or expected. Through it all the support from within the bowls community has been immense,

I am told that my fiercely competitive nature has helped me along the way, although I don’t know where they get that impression. Even I never dared to dream that I would bowl again but with applied modifications to my stance and delivery I am told I am no worse than I ever was.

But, in the rare moments when I can’t pretend and I have to be honest, there is a very real legacy. I am diagnosed “C4 Incomplete Tetraplegia”. I have residual issues with my balance and co-ordination. I have significant muscle wastage which no amount of focused training seems able to restore. Not surprisingly, I have restricted neck movement and associated pain. My left side is particularly weak and hard to accurately control. I have considerable levels of pain but not real pain, neurological pain similar to that which may be experienced by some amputees. In my case it manifests itself in my left hand and arm with my hand feeling like it is being scoured with a cheese grater, my left thumb has toothache and my arm feels as if it has been constantly battered by Mike Tyson for 15 rounds. My right side is a little better but often feels as if it is being burnt and even the slightest impact can send my brain into chaos. Even the force of water spray in the shower can be excruciating and I have no idea of temperature. I have chosen to reject the specialist drugs prescribed to manage this type of pain as the consultants admit the jury is out as to whether they do control the pain or whether they create such a comatose state that you are unaware of anything. In any event when I tried them, I was not allowed to drive, use tools of any sort, my speech was slurred and I was asleep more than awake……. I can achieve all that with copious amounts of alcohol, the consumption of which is far more pleasurable.

So, I am training my brain to ignore the pain. If I go into the sea for a “swim” (a circular splash around as my strength differentials and balance and co-ordination issues mean I just go round in circles which causes my 2 young granddaughters to collapse in fits of laughter) I have warned the family to keep an eye on me. The pain of being “buffeted” by the waves (sometimes as much as 3 or 4 inches high) forces me to close my eyes and I am afraid that one day I might ignore a shark clamping on to one of my legs, dismissing the pain as neurological.

Last year I was introduced to another fantastic community, Disability Bowls England. Every member has a unique disability and a story to tell. To see what so many manage to achieve through such great adversity is quite humbling but also motivational. There are categories for physical disability, visual impairment and learning difficulty and for those who wish to be considered for competitions there is an international assessment process to determine handicap categories. I am very proud to be a part of this group and following trials at Leamington just over a week ago, I am delighted to have made the “High Performance Outdoor Squad” from which the Home Nations, Commonwealth and World Championship Teams will be selected.

For anyone looking to take up a Sport for Life and make friends for life you could not do better than bowls. The same is perhaps even more true for anyone with any form of disability. For any Club looking to expand it’s offering, please explore the possibilities of making disabled bowling available.

My focus now is to strive to be and appear to be “normal”. To enjoy every moment of this new life that has been granted to me. To achieve the most I can, in everything I do. For myself, for my family, for all my friends, for all the team who have helped me and perhaps most of all as a tribute to my Surgeon, the man who I believe, with great conviction and with supporting evidence, was the finest Neuro Surgeon in the world.