

A Plan Changer

**3rd Dan Essay
By Kara Timmer**

After much thought as to what to write about I settled on the idea of talking about my experience with injury due to training and the process it took to get back to where I was.

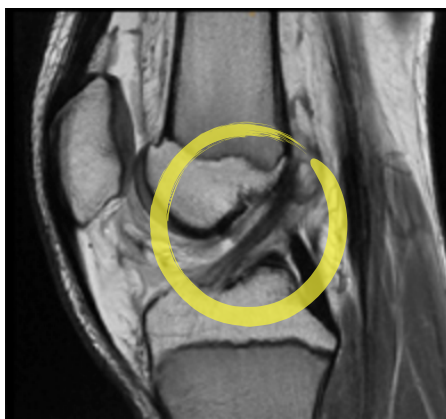
So to start, a little bit about where I was before the injury. Coming towards the end of 2012 I was in my last year of school and had big plans for what I wanted to do when I left. Knowing I wanted to go to Auckland to study Architecture I had decided to stay in Tauranga for one more year and work to save up some money as well as do my Recruits Course for the New Zealand Fire Service. At this time I was also training for the NZ Taekwon-Do team trials to compete at the World Championships in Spain the following year. After having competed for several years at an international level I had two last goals I wanted to achieve before I focused my attention on study for five years. The first of my goals was to achieve what I had at the World Championships in Wellington, but this time as a senior competitor. The second was that I wanted to beat the Russian Special Technique World Champ, Ekaterina Kozlachkova, after having just lost to her at the World Cup in England, 2012, in my first ever competition as a senior.

With my whole year ahead planned out I was feeling good going into the team trials in February 2013 having known I had done the hard work to get this far. With Special Technique and Power my main two options, I had Patterns to focus on first. As you practice and train for months towards a competition or grading the worst thought that generally crosses your mind is “what if I do the wrong movement,” or “what if I forget the pattern.” The idea of something serious happening doesn’t cross your mind. As I performed my first Pattern for the day, Juche, I felt as though I was doing really well. When time came to do the split kick, which I had been working hard on, everything felt as though it had just slowed down. While still flying in the air I felt great as I thought I had executed the kick really well, now all I had to do was land. At this moment all I remember thinking was how good I felt about my performance so far, I hadn’t even considered how something might go wrong, and why would I, I had been practicing this kick over and over for weeks and nothing happened then. However the fact is anything could happen at any time, but what would be the point worrying about that every second of the day. As I landed from my kick my stance was just a little bit too wide which caused my knee to buckle and give way. I can still remember the feeling of my knee dislocating and relocating itself as I fell to the floor. I had never thought that something as small as your stance being a bit too wide could cause this to happen. As I knelt on the ground gripping the mats with my fingers, I didn’t feel any pain but I knew that what had happened wasn’t right. Within seconds Master Rimmer was by my side and I was being carried off the mats. I don’t really remember much of what happened next, just people asking if I was alright and if I was hurt. Dr Jake Pearson came over to check on my knee, I was told to ice it and that he’d have another look after a little bit.

As I sat on the ground beside the mats icing my knee I watched as everyone else continued on. Later that day I returned to the trials after having been sent to the hospital by Dr Pearson. I had waited for several hours to get x-rays and to talk to a doctor and after being told they couldn’t see anything wrong and that it is likely to just be badly sprained I was looking forward to getting back into the trials after some resting. However my hope of continuing was short lived when Dr Pearson informed me that it would be best for me if I didn’t, as he believed I may have torn my Anterior Cruciate Ligament (ACL). To me, I had heard of this before but I hadn’t really understood what it meant. Dr Pearson did a movement test on both of my knees and showed me how the left knee stops, which is the ACL working, but my right knee had more give in the joint, therefore I may have torn it. In more detail, the ACL is one of a pair of crucial ligament in your knee and prevents the knee joint from moving too far forward, known as anterior tibial displacement, and a torn ACL requires an operation. However to be sure if I had done anything to it, I would need to

get it checked out properly. I was referred to a specialist at Grace Hospital back in Tauranga who then sent me for an MRI and referred me to see the surgeon, Andrew Stokes. The time it took to find out what I had done seemed like such a long time as I went from training everyday, to teaching my mini-kids on crutches and going to trainings just to watch. Throughout the few weeks of not knowing all that was running through my head was what would happen if I did need the operation, my whole plan for the year would be ruined. I had already missed my Recruits Course, now how would I find a permanent job for the year when I may have to have a week off for the operation and then more time off for the rehab? I already couldn't work where I was. But the biggest and most scary thought was I may not be able to go to Spain and have a chance at achieving my goals.

As I met with Mr Stokes we went through the results of the MRI. He showed me the images, which looked like black and white smudges on the screen, and talked me through what we were looking at. Looking at the computer screen, Mr Stokes showed me two dark black spots, one which is attached to the femur, and one attached to the tibia. He then continued to say how these two spots are supposed to be connected to form the ACL. I had completely ruptured my ACL. However Mr Stokes didn't stop there, he continued on to a series of other images to show why I was getting a pain in my knee when I walked. This was because I had also torn my meniscus, the cartilage between the two bones in your knee that act as a cushion. Some MRI image examples as to what my MRI results showed:



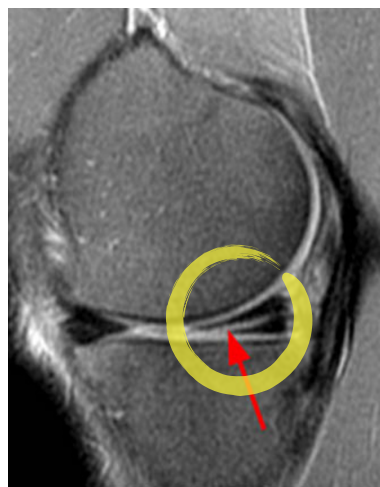
1. Normal ACL



2. Ruptured ACL



3. Normal Meniscus



4. Torn Meniscus

To hear this news, that I was hoping for weeks wasn't going to be true, was absolutely devastating. As we discussed what the next steps were I was finding it hard not to cry. I required an operation. This involved key hole surgery where they would take some of my hamstring, drill a hole in the femur and tibia, and hold the hamstring in place with a screw in each hole to act as a new ACL. The whole year I had planned out for myself felt as though it had just come crashing down around me. I had put so much work into my training to get ready for the World Champs in Spain and now I wasn't even going to be able to train. And where would I find a job that will let off for a few weeks while I have an operation and recover. The first step for me now was to book a date for the operation and as you could imagine there was a long wait before I could be booked in. After that, my 6-9 months of recovery could begin. In the mean time I was able to go back to training and do light trainings, I couldn't really do too much more damage. I also managed to find a job where I would be able to take the time off I'd need, and be able to work while still on crutches as I recovered. Although I was unable to compete at the World Champs in Spain, I had decided after much thought that I still wanted to go to support and help in any way I could, after all I had held off from going to University mainly so I could go to Spain. After talking to the coaches and emailing Master Pellow, I was offered a position to help coach in Special Techniques and Power. Although it was very hard not being able to train with the team, I continued to go along to as many trainings as I could, as well as the camps.

Several months later on Friday May 24th I went in for my operation. I was pretty hungry having not being able to eat for the last 12 hours, as I went through the process of being admitted and being given a room to sit and wait. I had a visit from Mr Stokes, who drew on my leg, and the anaesthesiologist as I nervously waited to go into theatre. Walking through the corridor and into the theatre room I could feel the cold. As I talked to one of the nurses I was administered anaesthesia and told to count back from ten. The next thing I remember is half waking up all dizzy and being told to open my mouth as the nurses tried to pull the breathing tube out. Several hours later I woke up again in a room all to myself. That afternoon I had a visit from Mr Brown, Mr Stokes and of course my family. Although I was rather uncomfortable, the only time I had any pain was when I tried to move my leg, so I tried to lay as still as I could. That night I had a very restless sleep as I tried not to move so my leg wouldn't hurt and so the needle in my arm wasn't too uncomfortable. I spent just one night in Grace Hospital with very friendly staff who came to check on me regularly throughout the night. The following morning was the first time I got out of bed. Trying to keep my leg as still as possible I struggled with my crutches to the bathroom. I think the pain of having to try lift my leg in and out of the bed is probably the worst pain I have ever felt. Before leaving the hospital that morning I had another check up from Mr Stokes who told me a few things, one of which that I was to start putting weight on my leg straight away. All I could think now was how is he expecting me to do that, as the only time I had moved I was in enough pain without doing anything with it. However, of course I did my best to put some weight on my leg as I walked, with my crutches, from the entrance of the hospital to the car.

My long journey towards recovery had just started, although before I could really do anything useful I had to get over the surgery. I spent the next week at home on the couch watching programs online and trying to occupy the time as I couldn't go anywhere. It didn't take long for the pain of walking to go away, but I had the most uncomfortable sleeps as I couldn't straighten my leg so had to try and sleep in the same place all night with a pillow under my knee. The following week I was back at work doing what I could, as well as back teaching my mini-kids class, which I did require a bit of assistance with, and watching trainings. I also meet with my surgeon, Mr Stokes, to get a check up on how my knee was recovering and to get the bandages

changed. For the first six weeks after the operation I was not allowed to drive anywhere so had to rely on other people to help get me to work and training. This proved the hardest when I was home alone for almost two weeks, as Mum had booked a trip to Australia earlier that year. Not wanting to miss out on her trip, as she never goes away, I told her I would be fine for the short time she was gone. I was able to arrange people to pick me up and take me to work and trainings, then drop me back home. The only thing I found difficult was to cook, as I was still on crutches.

About three weeks after the operation I was able to walk around with just one crutch, and after six weeks I could almost walk around normally, although with a bit of a limp. This meant I was able to get stuck into my rehab with the physiotherapist. With still having up to four months before I would hopefully be able to get back into light training, I was very eager to get working on my rehab. Every Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings I went to the gym at the physiotherapist's as soon as they opened, as well as had my daily exercises to do at home. Heading into the Winter period some mornings were rather chilly so took a bit more to get out of bed so early, although I never missed a session. Sometimes I would even beat everyone there so was given the key to open up the gym myself. To start my work on rehab I was set short simple exercises working all aspects of my body, but focusing mainly of course on my right knee. It was surprising to see how much muscle I had lost over the six weeks on crutches. Although I was walking as best I could on my leg right away, my right quad was quite soft and there was a noticeable difference in my two legs.

Over the next several months I continued my routine of going to the physio gym three times a week and doing my daily exercises as often as I could at home. Every three weeks I would have a session with the physio so he could check on my progress and give me new exercises. I started with simple tasks of stepping up and down on a step and working on bending my knee more, as I was unable to bend it past about 90 degrees, and it was even worse under pressure. I worked my way up towards being able to do a normal squat and lunges as I was slowly able to bend my knee more and more without any more pain. After several weeks I was improving quickly as I was able to do a full proper squat, bending my knees right down. At about 9 weeks after I started rehab, I was working on single legged squats and was starting to be able to do them easily. By now I was able to walk properly with no limp. I had continued teaching my mini-kids classes and visiting training almost every day, as well as going to the NZ team camps to help coach. As I was slowly improving I was starting to find it harder and harder to just sit and watch at trainings, I was so ready to get back into it.

Throughout this nine weeks I had seen Mr Stokes a couple of times so he was able to track my progress. At about three months post-op I met with Mr Stokes again, and very pleased with the progress I was making, I was able to go back to very light training and start going for light runs. Leaving his office, I was of course super excited and couldn't wait for the next training session. While still continuing with physio three times a week as well as my daily exercises as often as I could, I went back to training. Little did I know when I first got back into it how hard it would actually be to stop myself getting carried away. I was limited to pretty much just placing techniques and stepping through exercises. As the weeks passed my work at the physio was getting better and better. I was now starting to do some resistance exercises as well as small squat jumps. As I improved with my rehab work I was able to do more and more at training, although still on a tight leash, especially from the instructors, however I kept at it. I was learning to adapt a lot of what we were doing in class to something that I would find more comfortable doing. It was much better to be doing something rather than nothing.

About four months after my operation, on my birthday on October 3rd, I had my last meeting with Mr Stokes, who said I was allowed to start slowly getting back into training properly, I just wasn't allowed to kick yet. This had to be the best birthday present I could get as it is normally about six months before people are allowed to get back into normal training. It was just in time too as about a week or so before we left for Spain, one of the girls in the Power team had injured herself so was no longer able to do the knife hand which they had all agreed on. This required them to rethink what techniques they should each do. As the other two girls in the team where not very confident with the knife hand, I was asked if I would be alright to do it. As this didn't involve any harsh movement for my knee I was able to say yes. I spent the next week in the garage at home practicing over and over the knife hand strike so I could be ready for the day.

In October 2013, we set off with the NZ team to Spain for the World Championships. As I had had some rough times throughout my recovery process so far, watching people training what I should've been able to do, I wasn't too sure how it would make me feel having to sit back and watch everyone competing when this was what I really wanted to be doing. The tournament came around so fast and it felt as though the long days were racing past as we were all so busy and having fun. I was finding it a lot easier than I thought I would, although there were times when I wished I could jump in there to have a go. As I watched the Senior Female Special Technique and Power divisions I was starting to get a little annoyed by the amount of people who were missing their heights or their breaks. All I could think was how I could do that and how I should've been in there competing instead. As not one person broke the side kick in the Power division I was kicking myself knowing that it was my favourite kick and that when I was still training properly I was making it every time. Although I was feeling a bit upset and disappointed inside, I was having a great time being able to be there to still support and help out my team mates and to celebrate their achievements. The whole trip was a lot of fun, and although I didn't get to compete, other than in team power, it was so good to be able to still be there to support the team.

Back in New Zealand I was finally able to get right back into training and I couldn't have been more excited. I only had about four months left back in Tauranga before I moved up to Auckland so was training as often as I could. I was no longer going to the physio but was still taking it slowly. By February 2014 I was kicking normally again, I was finally getting right back into training and I couldn't have been more happy. Although still limiting myself with some movements, such as jumping, I wanted to make sure I wasn't going to hurt myself again. I was very cautious as to what I was doing, and to take it easy if anything was hurting. However during one sparring session out as Silla, as we were doing squat jumps, it felt as though something popped in my knee, even though I was taking it very easy and hardly making it off the floor. Sitting out, I was unable to straighten my leg without feeling pain in my knee. I sat down rubbing my knee and bending and straightening it until I felt something pop again and all of a sudden it felt as though nothing had happened. Although it felt painful, it was in the side of my knee and didn't feel as though it was too bad so I continued on training lightly. I went to the physio in the following days to get it checked and it seemed fine. I hadn't felt the pain again and my knee felt normal so decided to ignore it.

I moved to Auckland in March 2014 to start my studies as an Architecture student. As I was just starting my first year of study and things were pretty full on so I wasn't attending many training sessions. Although I wasn't training every week, my knee was feeling really good without any pains, other than a slight aching when it was really cold. After a couple of months living in

Auckland I was doing a bit more physical work and started to notice my knee was playing up again. I started to feel the popping in my knee again doing simple tasks such as making my bed, and it was starting to occur more frequently. It was almost as if something in my knee was popping out of place, causing it to be painful, then as I tried moving it, it would pop back to where it was supposed to be. As I had not long recovered fully from the last operation I was putting off seeing the surgeon as I didn't want to have to be told I had hurt myself again. After a couple of months dealing with the popping and the pain I decided it was time to make an appointment with Mr Stokes. After another MRI and a meeting with him, he told me I had another tear in the meniscus. The cartilage had been moving between the bones and my knee causing me pain. Although I would require another operation I was so glad to hear that my ACL was really good and there was no damage to it.

After about a month I was back down in Tauranga for my second knee operation, although this time it was a lot less serious. All they had to do was cut out torn piece of cartilage, which meant I was able to walk out of hospital, without crutches, later that day. I already felt way ahead of where I was last time as I was able to walk already, with a bit of a limp, and only had a month rehab before I was able to do normal trainings. By this time, around September, I was back into normal training with the High Performance team, hoping to go to Italy in 2015 to try and achieve my goals I still had. After two operations on my right knee I was extra cautious with everything I did from now on, especially after having almost half of the meniscus removed, as my knee now has less support and more rotation in it that it normally should. Continuing on with my studies everything was pretty busy as everything was starting to wrap up for the year and we had exams. As I still wanted to make sure I was doing well with all of my work I was only able to make the two HP trainings a week, which allowed me to rest my knee as I was still in the mind set of something else happening.

As trials for Italy came around in November I hadn't done as much work as I would've hoped as I had only been able to train for two months, but I was able to secure my spot in the team for Individual Special Technique, Power and Sparring, as well as the same team events. Since I was not long out of recovery for the second time I had to have a meeting with the coaches as they were worried about overloading me with too much to do as my knee may not be able to handle it. As I still had my mind stuck on wanting to achieve both of my goals I had set earlier I did my best to reassure them that I would be able to handle it all over the short period of five days competing. As training went on, over the months I started to worry less and less about my knee until it got to the point where I no longer think about it unless I was doing a lot of jumping, as I no longer felt any pain. I had been working harder and harder each month and no longer had the thought of hurting myself with any of the events I was set to compete in.

In May this year, two years and four days after my first operation, I was in Italy competing again at a World Championships, this time as a senior. Although I didn't quite manage to achieve all of the goals I had set for myself I was extremely happy with where I had gotten after two knee operations. To have come back from such a serious injury and for me to win the gold medal in the Senior Female Power division, especially as the smallest one in the division, made it even more special. I still have the dream of winning both the Power and Special Technique gold medals along with Best Overall Senior Female Black Belt at a World Championships, and hopefully next time, in Ireland 2017, I will make that possible.

I know now that although there might be set backs, whether big or small, as long as you keep working hard towards your goals they are still possible. There were times that I was quite down about what had happened, but I think without a set goal and the right supportive people, I wouldn't have made it back to where I am now. I am not completely over what happened, my next goal before Ireland, is to try and perform the split kick without any hesitation. And although this seems like it is going to take me some time, I know I have already come a long way from when I first performed the kick again after my operation. If I can come from landing on one foot, and shaking for hours after performing it, to being able to land on two feet with a bit of hesitation, I feel as though with a bit more work I will be able to make that happen, although I am still not sure if the thought of it happening again will ever leave my mind. The important thing to me is having a goal to work towards, because without a set goal I feel as though I wouldn't improve or get any better. There are still times now that my knee does get a bit sore, such as running on a hard surface or landing funny after a flying kick, but I think these are just small things I am going to have to learn to manage, as there usually are with any injury.

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