

# A positive attitude

## The most important thing sport can give you

By Dr J

One of the common influences towards pursuing a career in sports medicine is the thought of working with basically healthy, positive people who are motivated to recover quickly, and there couldn't be a better illustration than the following story.

A question I am often asked is: "What is the worst sports injury you have ever seen?" It is impossible to answer without further context. If the context is live, in the flesh, while I was sitting on the sideline as a team doctor, then it is probably a fractured tibia, which is both gruesome to see and potentially a devastating injury. I've seen worse injuries on video and, as I am a member of the NSW Sporting Injuries Committee, I review some very nasty cases, but I'm blessed to have never seen a catastrophic spinal injury live. I hope I never see one and the odds are that I probably won't. Fortunately catastrophic spinal injuries are rare enough that few of us, whether we are doctors, physiotherapists, players or coaches, will ever have the horrible experience of being a first-hand witness to one, let alone suffering one.

In the last year, I have had the great fortune though to meet a special individual who suffered a catastrophic spinal injury playing Rugby League in Sydney in 1977. I say great fortune because this bloke, in the way he has handled his life since his injury, is a rare inspiration that makes you believe that massive adversity is not enough to kill an unrelenting positive attitude.

The man's name is John Innes, and he was injured playing in the front row, as captain, for Bondi United, charging the ball up with his neck flexed and his

head down. His head hit an opponent's hip, his neck flexed and the next thing he knew was that his whole body had turned to jelly.

He was taken to Royal North Shore Hospital and diagnosed a quadriplegic, caused by a fracture-dislocation of his cervical spine. He had a C5/6 fusion surgically performed using a bone graft from his hip. Although the prognosis that he was given immediately after the injury was that he would be a complete quadriplegic for life, the diagnosis was eventually revised to incomplete quadriplegia, as he gradually regained some motor function, particularly in his arms. After a few years of rehab, he was able to walk short distances using crutches. John attributes the extent of his recovery partially to his positive attitude and notes that one of his driving forces was to prove wrong the medicos who told him he would never be able to walk again.

**Shortly after John Innes' injury, a higher profile player, John Farragher, also became a quadriplegic while playing for Penrith in the New South Wales Rugby League.**

The publicity surrounding Farragher's injury probably was the primary catalyst for setting up the NSW Sporting Injuries Insurance Scheme by the Wran Labor Government of the time. One of the initial mandates of the scheme was to pay retrospectively for some of the recently suffered catastrophic injuries, and Farragher and Innes were both beneficiaries. John Innes was awarded \$60,000 by the NSWIC and he also

received various smaller amounts from charity functions set up by the clubs he had played for.

By 1985, John had re-learned how to drive, using a car with special hand controls for braking and acceleration, and he obtained his taxi licence, using money he had saved from the various sources that supported him after the injury. In the same year he handed his invalid pension back to the government and he has supported himself ever since working as a taxi driver. Since 1985, he has been a taxpayer rather than a welfare recipient. He owns his cab and drives the night shift, employing a day driver to keep the cab on the road to pay his bills.

I met John in 2002 in a situation full of coincidences. He picked me up in his cab from the Easts Leagues Club at 5 o'clock on the morning after the Roosters had won the 2002 NRL Grand Final. We were both in a great mood, as were most of the Eastern Suburbs residents of Sydney. The Roosters hadn't won a Grand Final since 1975.

In 1975, John Innes was a Roosters player in their Jersey-Flegg (U/18) team. In the same junior team photo from that year were Kevin Hastings, who went on to become the Roosters longest-serving player (until Luke Ricketson broke his record in 2002), Steve Gigg, who in 2002 was the Roosters football manager, and Bob Johnson, coach of the Jersey-Flegg team in 1975 who was the interchange steward for the successful first grade team in 2002.

Two of my personal links to John Innes that we immediately worked out at the time were that I was the current

Roosters 1975 Jersey-Flegg team, featuring John Innes (solid circle), Robert Johnson (dashed circle), Steve Gigg (crossed circle). In front of Innes and next to Gigg is Kevin Hastings.



Roosters doctor and a current (board) member of the NSW Sporting Injuries Committee. I had no idea at that stage that he played with Steve Gigg under 'Boofa' Johnson. I also found out later that he trialled for Easts with Nathan Gibbs (now the Swans' doctor), that he was later coached by Paul Cross who is the father of current Roosters player Ryan Cross, and that he was a friend of Deb Cameron, who is now the practice manager at the Sports Medicine Clinic where I work at Sydney University.

All of these people who knew or played with John before his injury illustrate that, if it was not for the cruel intervention of fate, that he might have another job today, such as working as a manager or a coach at the Roosters, rather than driving a taxi as a quadriplegic.

John doesn't know what he would have done without the \$60,000 from the NSWISIC, but he is immensely proud that he has survived his injury with such a minimal amount of welfare in the years since. The key point is that his spirit wasn't diminished by his accident and that, if you have \$60,000 and a positive spirit it is better than \$600,000 if you have given up hope.

I must preface my next comments by reiterating my bias as a board member of the NSWISIC, but I must imagine that the context of receiving a payment from a non-profit government insurer has to help the spirit more than the alternatives of a for-profit insurance company or the tort law system.

While the NSWISIC is by no means a pushover — we knock back plenty of claims in cases where moderately injured people are clearly exaggerating

their disability to try to get over the payment threshold — because of our non-profit nature we bend over backwards to help those few individuals who have completely devastating injuries. This has been part of the charter of the scheme since its inception, with the retrospective payment of the Innes injury being a classic example. (Obviously a for-profit insurance company would never have made a retrospective payment).

Another example was a more recent case of a quadriplegic injury to an American student playing rugby in Sydney. The cheque for the maximum payment, now \$171,000, was accelerated so that it could be delivered before he flew back to the USA, in order to help meet the transportation costs.

There is a good argument that this maximum payment should be increased, which would have a negative effect of increasing the premiums for all athletes in NSW, and these sorts of decisions are under regular review. What I don't believe can be argued is that it is better to receive whatever money you are entitled to in a benevolent environment, where there is no argument over entitlement.

What would it be like to be given a payment by an insurance company for being a complete quadriplegic and then, upon recovering some partial function and learning to drive and walk again with crutches, have the insurance company threaten to take you to court

to recover some of its payout because your injury wasn't as bad as first thought? If you are running an insurance company listed on the stockmarket, your bottom line responsibility to shareholders would insist you took this course of action, but in doing so you might break the claimant's heart beyond repair.

Worse still than the environment of a tight-arsed insurer is that of the adversarial tort law system. The one redeeming feature of the legal system from the victim's point of view is the ability to come up with astronomical lottery number payouts in a successful case, which remain pretty substantial even after deducting the lawyers' equally astronomical fees.

**The massive downside is that, at a time when you need every friend you can hold on to, the only way to win the case is to turn one of your colleagues into the devil.**

The referee who didn't enforce the rules properly and allowed the scrum to collapse. The coach who played you out of position when one of your teammates was injured. The groundsman who didn't water the field when the playing surface was too hard. The doctor who didn't tell you to give up rugby last time you were injured. The administrators who didn't change the rules of the game or erect a sign on the sidelines warning you of the risks of quadriplegia.

Some of the heartening experiences that John Innes recalls included the benefit nights conducted by his football clubs, where his friends and coaches turned out to offer their sympathies, and the fact that many of them kept offering their support in the years afterwards. The fact that John still lives in the Eastern Suburbs of Sydney is obviously a big benefit to him, as he has kept in contact with as big a support network as possible. But what happens if you happen to be suing members of your support network?

Con Foscolos the wrestler was awarded a multi-million dollar payout last year in the Supreme Court of Victoria, but he needed to sue his coach and his youth club in order to get the money. I'm not saying he shouldn't have taken the action he did, because maybe there wasn't going to be any other way to finance his ongoing medical care. (NB. This is a great argument for making the NSWSIIS a Federal Government scheme so that all Australian athletes can be covered).

**But, after a successful court win, how can you maintain a positive attitude about your life when you have millions of dollars but had to sue your coach and your friends in order to get the money?**

It is reminiscent of the joke (which you need to say aloud to appreciate) that the difference between a lawyer and a rooster is that the rooster "clucks de-fiant".

In the debate about compensation, we shouldn't lose sight of prevention. In Rugby League, the major risk for spinal injury is the tackle. Authorities have acted appropriately in recent years to police certain dangerous techniques by the tackling player, with much harsher penalties for 'spear-tackles' and head-high tackles. There are still dangerous techniques that need more attention.

One of the New Zealand Warriors has made a name for himself for charging at opponents with his head down and hitting with his head and shoulder. These are considered legal tackles and even 'hit of the year' nominations by some commentators. The danger with this technique is that it will be copied by someone without the same neck strength. In American football, an illegal spear-tackle actually refers to the tackling player spearing an opponent with his head (or helmet). John Innes was injured with his head flexed in possession of the ball, and he attributes his injury to his own poor technique of defending himself from a tackle. In Aussie Rules, the number of tackles is fewer, but the issues are similar. In the last spinal injury at the elite level in Australian Football, Neil Sachse (playing for Footscray in the VFL) was injured in a similar mechanism to John Innes.

The issues are different for the sport of Rugby Union. Though there is also potential for spinal injuries in tackles, the scrum is a problem which is now basically unique to Union. In Rugby League, the scrum is virtually non-contested and, because the forwards are hardly pushing, the forces are way below the injury threshold. To its credit, Rugby Union is moving towards non-contested scrums in junior and lower level matches. However, this change probably can't come soon enough at all levels of the game.

Rugby League probably didn't move towards non-contested scrums because of injury concerns but because it was a professional game that wanted to encourage more open play for the benefit of its paying spectators. Rugby Union is – along with golf and cricket – one of the world's great 'gentlemen' games which is very proud of its traditions. Its tradition of having scrum rules which rarely but consistently lead to spinal injuries is one that needs to be abandoned.

In conclusion, the most important factor keeping John Innes positive after his injury was his love of the sport he played. He still watches Rugby League



John Innes recent spinal X-ray showing fusion.

matches regularly on television and remains a passionate Roosters supporter. Every football cliché he ever heard from a coach about fighting back when you are down would have been relevant as he fought to piece his life together after his spinal injury. The camaraderie of being in a team sport must have helped his attitude towards recovery.

Though we now truly understand the physical benefits of regular exercise, as scientists we probably still haven't been able to quantify properly the massive psychological benefits of playing sport. For every person who leaves football bitter in retirement, there are 10 who leave it better – and happier – people.

There are some other physical problems caused by football that are far more common than spinal injuries, such as osteoarthritis of the knee. Yet surveys of ex-players almost always show that, for every 100 ex-football players who suffer knee arthritis in their retirement, 95 or more of them would play football again if they had their time over. For all the physical damage that football can do, it can promote a psychological sense of well-being that is usually far more powerful.