

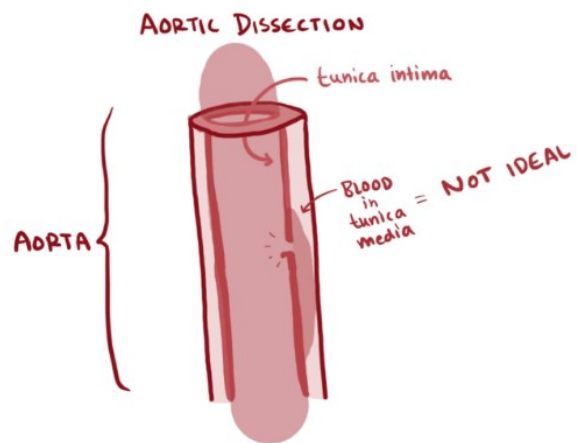
Back from the dead



2015 was my last year as an M50, and very gratifying sports-wise. In April I was briefly top-ranked SMOCcie, around 700th nationally. In May I won my only football trophy ever at the Wicken Veterans tournament. In July I ran the Snowdon Race and the Rydal Round. In September I set a parkrun PB of 21:34, breaking through the 70% Age Grade barrier. Then in October I competed for Wales at the Veterans Home Internationals and updated my twitter profile to “international athlete”.

So, as you'll imagine, I woke on 1 January 2016 as an M55 excited to find out what I could achieve against an older cohort. This optimism lasted for about five minutes after I got out of bed, when suddenly I felt an unusual tearing and burning sensation down the inside of my sternum. I didn't know what this was, but I could tell that it wasn't good or normal. For quite a long time Northampton A&E couldn't tell what it was either. Short-staffed by the bank holiday weekend, it was late the following afternoon before they put me into a CT scanner. Fifteen minutes after that, they explained that my problem was really quite bad, and that an ambulance would be taking me to Oxford within a couple of minutes.

The Bad Thing was an aortic dissection, which roughly means that the inner layer of the main pipe coming from my heart had broken open. This is not ideal. When I reached Oxford, a consultant gave me a form to sign consenting to an emergency operation, but advised me not to read it because I didn't have time. (50% of aortic dissections die within three days; I'd had mine for a day and a half.) He reassured me that the chances of surviving the operation were about 85%. A quick calculation showed this to be the same odds as Russian Roulette. This was not as reassuring as he had hoped.



The next twelve hours are a complete gap in my memory, although I understand that they cut open my femoral artery, ran my blood supply through a fridge until my brain reached suspended animation, cut open my chest with a buzzsaw, stopped my heart, cut open the aorta, applied a size 34 gel-weave interposition graft made of terylene, restarted my heart and then put everything back together. Having resigned myself to the possibility that I was dead, it was quite pleasant to wake up and find my son Will sitting at the end of my bed. For the next few nights, I would wake up at strange hours finding I was still in intensive care. (Most memorable overheard conversation: “does the chart show the drugs he’s had or the ones he’s supposed to have?”) There's a selfie [here](#); it's not a pretty sight.

I went home a week later. It took a while before I could get very far from bed. The blood transfusions meant that I sweated so uncontrollably that Ros had to change all the bedding twice a night, and my chest was so fragile that I had to squeeze a scarf round myself any time I felt a sneeze or a cough coming. But within another few days I was able to start a regime of walking round the house. First one lap, then two, then lots. I had a follow-up meeting with the cardiology registrar, who cheerfully told me that eventually I'd be able to do all the things I'd been doing before. "But I used to do fell races and play left-wing at football" I told him. He did look slightly doubtful at that point. I knew then that I'd never do either of those things again.

Seven weeks after the operation, I walked round Very Short Green at Ashridge. (My participation added nearly 200 ranking points to the winner's tally. He's never thanked me.) However, as I started trying to run again, I found that my left leg was painfully cramping after a few hundred metres. An MRI scan revealed that the main artery was blocked, probably by some gunk dislodged during the operation. Medical opinion was that the best treatment was to keep running and my system would develop routes round the blockage: in fact, the more it hurt, the better that was. That was some consolation as I limped round the far side of Willen Lake with my leg screaming at every step.

Little by little I got back to regular parkruns and started competing over longer distances. I became familiar with some of the initially alarming side effects as my body struggled for blood supply after races: sometimes a sharp chest pain, sometimes migraine auras with lurid jaggy lines around my vision, and sometimes a breakdown of my steering mechanisms so that I swerve uncontrollably to one side as I try to walk. In January 2017, we went to New Zealand for the World Masters Games, where I came 55th out of 150 in the M55 Sprint. Aha, I thought, heading back towards normal.

Then in May 2017 I went for a routine follow-up scan. A few weeks later, I was surprised to be given an appointment at the Urology clinic. Strange, I thought, I get taken short sometimes but that's not unusual at my age. Well, I went to Urology and they told me I had a tumour on my kidney that was probably cancerous. This was not as drastic as it sounded; it required a bit of keyhole surgery, a few days in hospital, and no particular effort on my part. And it was cancerous, so now I can claim to be a cancer survivor.

However, the next year was rather frustrating. I had been recovering well, with parkrun times down from 32 minutes to 28 minutes. They now went back to 32 minutes and, despite the elegant accuracy of keyhole surgery, took more than a year to recover. Gradually, however, I improved. On a whim, I started playing walking football. Walking football is not as feeble and geriatric as it sounds; it's possible to walk really quite fast, which suits my "maximal effort, minimal skill" approach. However, I was delighted when I was invited to a full-speed five-a-side game. I found that, despite my problems, I could hold my own against 18-year-olds, some of them on the fringes of the semi-pro game. This fills me with joy.

Next, one of my walking football colleagues mentioned that I was looking a bit podgy. This seemed very unlikely; I never looked at the scales, but I knew that my energetic lifestyle kept my weight under control. I was wrong; I was 8kg heavier than I thought I was. I made some small dietary changes, lost 10 of those 8 kilograms, and found that the effect on my speed was spectacular. My first post-lockdown parkrun was more than four minutes faster than the last pre-lockdown, and my average ranking points jumped by about 50.

So last month we were in Ambleside for the Lakes Five Days, and I noticed that there was a short fell race on the evening of the rest day. I entered, of course. Waiting at the start was a bit daunting, since almost everyone there seemed to be a lot younger than me. But once we started on the 40 degree slope up Steel Fell, it was great. I had enough energy on the ascent to chat to a young V60 from DVO about how wonderful it was just to be able to compete in an event like this. I was pleased to find that there were a few people behind me, and almost no-one coming past me.



It was better still to bounce along the soft grass of the summit ridge with a clear, low sun shining across onto Fairfield, and even overtake a couple of runners on the steep descent.

And I wasn't last; I wasn't even on the last page of the results.

Two weeks later, I was visiting my parents who live in Snowdonia, and ran Ras y Cnicht, the Cnicht Race. Cnicht is my favourite mountain, a lovely little summit where Ros and I watched the dawn rise on millennium morning. It was utterly gleeful to fly down the gentle grassy lower slopes. Even though my daughter Carys beat me by 6 minutes.



So the consultant was right; I can do all those things again.

What, if anything, has all of this taught me? First, that it's fine being dead; it's the people around you that suffer. Second, that carrying extra weight has a massive effect on speed. Third, that sport is marvellous. I have no plans to stop competing as if I was still twenty.

