

CHANGE AND STAYING WITH IT

Back in Dec of 2019 I had a significant injury, my most concerning yet. Tearing an already tender and weaker shoulder. Until then I had been very fortunate avoiding any injuries that had impacted me long term. Not only did I have to face the hard reality of my physical limitations but for the first time I had to seriously reevaluate how I had been going about things physically and determine what I really wanted to do going forward and how best to go about it.

I was several years out of competitive CrossFit (2008-2013), but was continuously doing much of the same exercises and work out formats but I was less invested. I was in cruise control mode just working out. A common phase we all experience but for a dedicated fitness professional it was not insignificant. I was maintaining an advanced fitness level but leading up to the injury I remember being more mindless in my approach. And Bam! Then it happened. A very sharp, figuratively loud pain zapped my left shoulder causing me to instantly stop and drop off the dip bars. Here I was doing an exercise I had been doing in my sleep since I was a baby teenager. After decades of putting my shoulders through the wringer and years of minor (and not so minor) shoulder pain that came and went with overuse, this time my shoulder finally demanded “no more, time to change.”

So after getting my first orthopedic evaluation, recommendation for an MRI and possible surgery I waited it out. Surgery for me? I wasn't psychologically ready for that yet and then the world immediately stopped with the pandemic. Those factors all led to me waiting it out, avoiding the MRI. Soon enough the pain became manageable though my arm was noticeably weaker than even before. But I carried on without medical intervention for almost 4 years, using my own expertise and external resources to navigate how to rebalance and strengthen my shoulder(s).

Right after the injury I rehabbed on my own, modifying around the arm for the first time ever. As the acute pain dissipated after a few weeks with certain movements I restored passable function with reshaped workouts and modified Capoeira. I was encouraged I could still continue with my physical crafts as long as I stayed away from specific movement patterns and reducing, if not eliminating entirely, a few common exercises I had always done. As I adapted my regimen I found that it was an opportune time to eliminate what I wasn't inspired by and prioritize what I was drawn to and excelled at: Bodyweight skills and Capoeira. My shoulders especially only had so many reps left so I refocused on the two. Two years later on I even got back into my old roots of hip hop dance, re-introducing House Dance technique as an aerobic substitute for the Air Bike I had been doing at home weekly. I was surprised by how demanding it was at first and how much internal satisfaction it gave me.

In any event almost a year after the injury I fortuitously stumbled upon a Calisthenics athlete/coach interview that caught my attention. It seemed to be perfect timing. Calisthenics: A bodyweight & gymnastic based set of exercises and sport was very new to

me but the aesthetic made sense and was vaguely familiar, considering my background in acrobatic hip hop dance and capoeira and the fact that the first 10 years of my workout routine (10-20yrs of age) was strictly bodyweight resistance. Therefore it wasn't a difficult transition, rather a return of some sorts. So in September of 2021 I officially began a Calisthenics program. Not to be confused with the American connotation: moderate aerobics. It's known around the European and Australian world as a strength training method using bodyweight for resistance consisting of dynamic and static movements such as handstand pushups or handstand holds for examples. The word Calisthenics originates from the Greek words Kallos (beauty) and Sthenos (strength). The planche and front lever are two of the most popular skills.

So I purchased separate programs to train those skills in addition to a couple others from that Athlete/Coach I stumbled upon and have been doing it 3x a week since. After almost a year of following the program precisely I began to parse and customize what specific movements I could continue to do and what other ones were not in my best interest with respect to the injury and my desired goals. Even though I had found a craft I instantly wanted to dive into I learned I couldn't just do all of it and had to prioritize and adjust and build an applicable program. Finding what I most liked and what was most effective while reducing the risk of re-injuring my shoulder.

In the process I put heavy weightlifting aside. To reduce overall shoulder load and to prioritize doing what currently inspired me most. After all I had just completed two decades of vigorous weightlifting. From an energy expenditure standpoint many max efforts in Calisthenics are similar to heavy lifting for 3, 5, 8 reps. I've had some flare ups but nothing major, staying away from dips, pull-ups, and pushups. And instead executing straight arm strength exercises which don't cause the acute pain, if at times some discomfort. Although I've established a routine where the pain is minimal and manageable, years after the injury I still have a loss in stability and strength, unlikely to fully recover without surgery. After a couple of years the left shoulder pain level did get worse, specifically during my sleep. So I finally ended up getting another exam and the actual MRI and proof of tearing in a couple of parts of the shoulder: the Rotator cuff and Labrum. They also found a cyst pressing up on a nerve which to my surprise, according to the Ortho, was the main cause of the pain. I was warned about the tradeoffs of surgery and the possibility the improvement wouldn't be as much as I would like. But a cyst drain and cortisone shot could really help. I was skeptical but accepted the procedure and was surprised and impressed how quickly and significantly the cyst drain relieved the pain. 8 months later I am still going pretty strong. I have mild pain here and there with usage and some discomfort with sleep. Still with limited sleep position options but it doesn't keep me up awake. So will see how far I can take this but I am trying to avoid surgery until absolutely necessary. Not only would it be a 6 month recovery process, but I would still have to proceed with the same caution post operation as I do now and with no guarantees of a pain free shoulder.

In addition to finding and customizing a movement practice that inspired me and accommodated my shoulder, the programs have provided several rehabilitative and proactive strength exercises (many I am sharing with my clients) for long time neglected shoulder stabilizers and postural muscles. With all this I have found renewed motivation and something I look forward to doing rather than it only being just another task ahead. I've always enjoyed pushing myself physically, that has come natural to me but I often didn't think of purpose or the bigger picture: "Why am I doing this?" I've liked to physically push hard also enjoying the energy it gives me but now I've gotten back to building towards skills and improvements on a long term scale. So even if it's likely that I won't attain the full advanced versions of all the skills I am training, I can still enjoy the action and the progression steps along the way. Finding value apart from the physical success I achieve. The planche, front lever, human flag, press handstand and so on... just have some fun while sticking with the challenge and you shall receive.