

Injury in sport – it's more than physical!

I've been swimming since I was one year old and joined my first club age 7, competing in my first (albeit low-level) competition the same year. I have always loved being in the water and the buzz I get from the exercise. In fact I feel smug when I get up for morning training in the dark, and lifted after a hard set, knowing I have really made an effort. I feel even more exhilarated when I race and sometimes win.

However, what happens when injury strikes and training drops off and the PBs stop coming? The biggest mental battle with oneself is what happens.

Coping with injury in sport is barely talked about at amateur levels, and there is no emotional resource available from Swim England (or certainly none that I have found). 20 months ago in August 2024, during my first race at summer nationals and while teetering on the backstroke ledge waiting for the start whistle, I experienced a sharp pain in my right hip and groin that persisted throughout the entire two lengths of the race. It affected my form and my race time but thankfully I did enough to final. In the hours between the heat and final I was tearful and fearful because the ache in my right groin was pulsing and ibuprofen wasn't touching the sides. I swam the final, it wasn't pretty or comfortable, but I nabbed a silver.

The joy was momentary because I needed help to get out of the water and could not stand unaided; the pain in my right hip, groin and thigh was immense. My nationals came to an abrupt end, withdrawals from my subsequent races were lodged. Trying their best to support me, my parents immediately asked around for physiotherapy recommendations, thinking that such intervention accompanied by a few weeks out during squad summer shutdown would be enough to get me back on form for the following season.

What followed was a rollercoaster ride with lots of long drops into black holes.

I engaged in twice weekly physio initially in the summer shut down and then a light return to training in mid September with physio ongoing. By the November and despite not being back to a full training week, I thought I would just about be ok to race at winter regionals. 200m backstroke was first up. It is always a tough event, but I can honestly say that my race was a disaster. Never, in all the years that I'd been racing, even on that awful day at summer nationals, had I failed to finish a race; but I had to stop after 100m, overcome with explosive pain in my right hip like nothing I had experienced before. I was beside myself in tears, some of which were due to the pain, but some due to the embarrassment I felt about stopping and hanging on a lane rope while my competitors finished the event.

It's really difficult to put into words just how terrible I felt about myself that day and my coach had zero comforting words. My parents clearly worried for my physical and emotional state took more action and paid for me to see an orthopaedic specialist who actioned an MRI. This revealed a slight tear to the labrum (cartilage) around my right hip. The advice was that this would never be able to repair itself, but with physio and strength building the pain could possibly be managed enough for me to continue training and competing. It was recommended that I carry on with this conservative route for a little while longer before entertaining surgical options.

For the next few months I carried on with physio but was intermittent at swim training, as it felt like every other day I was in too much pain to either start or complete a set. Some narky comments were made by some squad 'mates' behind my back that I was putting it on, that it

couldn't be as bad as I was making out, and even moaning to the coach about me doing pull in kick sets. That was a really low point for me. The pool had always been my happy place, my squad mates were people I looked forward to spending 13 hours of the week with, but the lack of understanding of what I was going through and the lack of support was enough to make me contemplate giving up the sport. I was looking into the void.

I deliberately avoided the rest of the short course racing season after derailing at winter regionals, and focused on trying to be ready for long course season instead, which started with County championships at the end of January 2025. I would usually have swum the distance freestyle events at counties (having won those races for several years), but I confined myself to entering the 100m/200m events only. I had been religious with my physio, so surely these shorter races would be manageable. 100m backstroke was scheduled first; I was nervous, wanted to vomit, but I pumped myself up to really take it on. The first 50m was ok, but the pain arrived right off the tumble turn and my form fell apart over the second length. I finished, thankfully, but the pain was now in both hips, so I found myself once again having to withdraw from the remaining events.

I was crestfallen (again) and in the weeks that followed the pain was more constant, so much so that some days I couldn't even sit down in lessons at school, and lying down to sleep at night was no relief.

So, my parents took me back to the orthopaedic consultant who said "I think you need to see a more suitable specialist at the Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital." That happened swiftly and by late February 2025 I had had an X-Ray, CT Scan and a 3 Tesla MRI (did you know that there are different grades of MRI? The higher the Tesla the better the quality of image!). Unlike the previous 1 Tesla MRI, these new tests revealed extensive damage to the labrum in both my hips (not minor tears) and a cyst on my left. The consultant said this was undoubtedly caused by the continuous repetitive kick motion and something called femoroacetabular impingement, which is where extra bone on the ball part of the upper thigh bone creates a non-spherical shape and grinds away against the labrum and hip socket. Surgery was the only way to deal with this.

Swimming was such a huge part of my life that I didn't know who I was without it. So I wanted to know whether post-surgery I would be able to return to competitive swimming. The surgeon said hopefully, but no guarantee. However, he was clear on one thing, that without surgery now (just shy of my 16th birthday), I would need complete hip replacements by the age of 30.

My first surgery (right hip) was in early April 2025 before my GCSEs. It was keyhole surgery and I was home 16 hours later, stitched up and on crutches for the next 8 weeks. I resumed physio after 4 weeks and light swim training (pull only, no kick) after 6 weeks. My second surgery (left hip) was in mid July, right after GCSEs. I was back to light training in late September.

My surgeon was happy at my 2 and 8 week post-surgery checks, and for the first time in a long time I could bend down to put my socks on and not get a sharp pain all through my thighs. That feeling was fantastic.

By November when short course race season started again, I wanted to be able to race. I had been absent from swim meets for so long that I felt if I didn't get back in the game, then it really would be the end of my swim journey. However, I knew I wasn't physically ready, because I had upped my training hours and the aches in my hips and groin had returned. I probably wasn't emotionally ready for racing either because I was terrified of max kick and the fear of re-injury.

So I bailed out of entering winter regionals, I just couldn't face a possible repeat of the day I failed to finish the 200m backstroke a year before. However, I entered a lower level meet as my comeback meet instead (low key, less spectators, fewer competitors). I didn't have enough swim hours under my belt to really pull out good times, but I was secretly hoping the surgery had equipped me with bionic hips and that I might swim the best times of my life. Unfortunately not! However, I had one post-surgery meet under my belt now and it was brilliant to be back poolside on race days, my happy place.

That feeling was shortlived, as I plummeted again. What followed my return to racing over the next few weeks was several episodes of paralysis from the waist down, sometimes coming on in swim training, another time coming on at school. That was really scary. My parents feared nerve damage from the surgeries and I was frightened. Seriously, how many setbacks can one girl take?!

So back we went to RNOH to see the surgeon who was 97% sure these bouts of paralysis were not surgery related. Good odds but no answers. He referred me to a neurologist instead who arranged for me to have muscle and nerve tests (otherwise known as EMG tests) at another hospital in London. The patient leaflet that the hospital sent out said "the test is not painless, and you will feel discomfort". Understatement! A needle rammed into your muscles really hurts!! The leaflet also said that the side effects were "mild tingling in feet and lower legs, lasting a few hours". What followed for me was a week of uncontrollable leg spasms, which just added more emotional stress.

At the subsequent follow-up with the neurologist he advised that the EMG was sound (great news, but the paralysis remained unexplained), and the spasms could be (but not commonly identified as such) side-effects of the EMG. I am now in a wait and see situation, just told to monitor and diarise any further issues, with review in 3-6 months. On the upside, I have not had another incident of paralysis since December nor any further leg spasms. On the downside, I am still constantly aching in hip, groin, legs and/or lower back.

The labrum tears that started off this whole injury rollercoaster ride may be repaired but there's still a long way for me to go to being back on form. The weekly physio sessions continue, I'm training as much as I am able, and I am back to competing, but I'm way off my pre-surgery race times and I can't say it isn't hard to deal with the fact that my main competitors from 20 months ago are now so much quicker than me.

However, I'm really proud of myself for not quitting despite everything that has happened. Part way through all of this in January 2025, my club got a new head coach. He has been amazing and very supportive, happily adapting training sessions for me on days when my hips aren't up for a hard kick set, and not focusing on the 'race times'. He doesn't judge or get annoyed if I have to miss sessions, or if I have to withdraw from a race. If it weren't for him having faith in me, I probably would have quit; but you know what, I'm not ready to call time on swimming, I still love it even though I'm not smashing it.

It's emotional putting this all down on paper, but it feels good to get it out in the open, to hopefully raise awareness to the mental battle that comes with physical injury. I think it was only after I had had surgeries that my squad mates really understood and appreciated how severe my injuries were, but so few really understand the anguish of coping with injuries in the first place and the struggle to get back to form.

Before I agreed to the surgeries, I wanted to understand how common my situation was in swimmers and if it was feasible to properly come back to competitive level afterwards. I didn't find a single article on the Swim England website or blog on how to manage injury at all, how to cope with injury, how to return from injury, or who to contact if I just wanted to talk about injury. The Wavepower policy might want to ensure that swimmers are able to enjoy the sport in a safe, positive and enjoyable environment, but it is useless when it comes to issues like mental health.

Since returning to competing a few months ago, another issue became apparent, and that is that so many competitions require you to have a ranked times from within a certain time window. This is totally reasonable of course, but when injury and surgery prevent you from being able to get those times, there's no advice on how to ask for exceptional entries or if and how Swim England can support such entries. For me, this was an additional stress on top of everything that I'd already been through and meant I had to return to racing much sooner than I should have just to ensure I banked times to be eligible to enter bigger meets later in the season.

I'm sure I'm not the only swimmer out there facing this issue, so, all I am really highlighting is for Swim England and the local ASA's to provide some resources for helping amateur athletes navigate the injury journey. The country's sporting organisations should be doing everything they can to help teenagers stay in sport not preventing them from doing so.

While this article is written about me and my ride on the injury Nemesis©, it's really on behalf of every amateur swimmer. We give so much of ourselves to our sport, it shapes us in so many ways, in fact it defines us. So when something like an injury happens, particularly one which has persisted, and we find ourselves facing the black hole into Oblivion©, we need the support of our friends, our team mates, our coaches, our local ASA and our national organisation to show they care.

Too little focus is given by Swim England to swimmers at small local clubs, who train at substandard swimming pools, who probably don't have diving blocks or even coiled lane ropes, and they certainly do not have all the resources and facilities available to the Reptonians or Millfielders. But small local club swimmers are still dedicated amateur athletes, they still pay their membership to Swim England and they still deserve support in this sport.

I want to take this opportunity to give a nod to the **GLL Foundation** here, which has been supporting me for the last year through a Training Award. This award gives me access to my local gym for free and access to live webinars and newsletters, which delve into things like injury, setbacks, return to competition, and life beyond my chosen sport (amongst other things). The interactive webinars in particular have made me feel less alone, because they have given me the chance to hear from and talk to professional athletes and other amateur athletes like me that have gone through similar situations. These inclusive and collective sessions have been really valuable. I may not be fully recovered or back on top form, but GLL gets that participation in sport is not all about winning.

I am grateful to GLL for firstly recognising how much time I have committed to my sport in granting me a training award; secondly for continuing to support me through a really tough year; and thirdly for plugging the gaps that my own sporting organisation (Swim England) have not filled (i.e. emotional and practical support for coping with injury). However, all of this support should be coming from Swim England.

Before I end my missive, I just want to identify one more issue that Swim England neglects, and that is support for parents of amateur swimmers. Whilst writing this it caused me to realise that the swim journey that I've been on since I was tiny, was my parents' journey too, and how hard it has been for them watching me physically and mentally suffer from the injuries.

For the best part of ten years they have sacrificed sleep for early morning training, their evenings to get me to training and their weekends to get me to every meet. They've watched every race and shared in the PBs, the wins, the losses. They witnessed my pain and tears at summer nationals, at winter regionals and most recently at counties and they have been heartbroken for me that the injuries have prevented me from my enjoyment in the sport.

Several times over the past 20 months they have bravely asked if I wanted to quit, reassuring me that they would support whatever decision I made. Each time my decision has been to keep swimming, and each time they have been there for me. So I want to close by doffing my cap to my parents, and to all the other parents propping up their amateur athletes, and by urging Swim England to put some parent resources out there. The swimmers do the swim, but it's the parents that do everything else.

Thank you for reading.