

## **Dale Jackaman**

### **I'm a 'Voluntary' Below Knee Amputee**

#### **UPBEAT, POSITIVE, HARD DRIVEN**

A bit of history is in order. It's 2002 and I'm forty-six years old. I was the eldest child of a British Royal Air Force Officer and his wife who immigrated to Canada in the early nineteen-fifties. We lived all through my childhood and teen years on various air force bases across Canada and the US. Later on I myself spent some time in the military and did several tours of duty in the Middle East. Work wise I'm a senior manager and IT Director for a large scientific research facility in Vancouver. Personality wise I'm a very upbeat and positive person but am also hard driven and perhaps a bit of a workaholic. And I'm married, with a child, and life is good.



*Dale Jackaman hiking on trails in Kamloops*

#### **CHILDHOOD CANCER & FIRST AMPUTATION**

When I was eleven years old, while my father was stationed at CFB Gimli in Manitoba, I was diagnosed with a particularly fast growing primary malignant tumor in my left ankle. Unfortunately it had also spread to the lymph nodes in my upper left groin area. The treatment in those days was surgery to remove everything and anything in and around the cancerous areas plus massive doses of radiation. My lower left leg was literally burned to a crisp much the same as the worst and most horrific of burns. Much of the damage was permanent and even the vascular system in that area was affected. Survival rates for this kind of cancer in children were near zero in those days so the fact that I'm sitting here typing all of this out is a near miracle.

Hospital accommodation was in an adult ward with what felt to me like all very elderly and terminal patients. I gather I was the brave stiff upper-lipped little boy but, despite the best medical attention one could get, and the total love and care of my family around me, the psychological scars created during this time period did much to destroy what was left of my childhood. I also knew that I wasn't expected to live long and the wait for the final verdict

stretched out from weeks to months and finally to years. My cancer never returned but the psychological and physical scars remain with me to this day, one set manifesting itself in bouts with high anxiety - the other with extreme pain due to the major arteries in my lower left leg slowly shutting down due to radiation damage and aging.

## **TEN YEARS LATER**

It was about ten years ago when I started having pain while walking or running any distance beyond a few laps on the jogging track. It was diagnosed at the time as being all sorts of things but not what it finally turned out to be, something called intermittent claudication or the lack of blood flow above my left ankle when induced by walking or running exercise. I had some hope that an arterial bypass, or some other medical technology, would become available but it was not to be. After much personal research, and a few specialists along the way, it was obvious that the site was inoperable and no surgeon in their right mind would attempt anything heroic. In short, the risks were just too high to open up a previously irradiated area and expect it to heal properly.

About four to five years ago I knew that time was running out. I could walk perhaps two city blocks before I would keel over in pain. Two years ago that came down to a city block, the last year not even that. Resting pain was on the rise, infections in my toe and deep in my foot started to occur on a regular basis and the whole area was slowly going numb from lack of circulation.

## **ELECTIVE AMPUTATION**

So, recognizing that I had to have my lower leg removed I did some research on amputations and what to expect. This is somewhat dangerous as there is a ton of data out there on the web and a lot of it is bad or seemingly misleading. The one hard fact I came up with is that everyone's situation is different and there are no promises, no guarantees and certainly some risk. The only real statement that I could squeeze out of my doctors was that it's best to get any amputation done while you're as healthy as possible. However, there was one major positive I learned from all this - the success stories are many and the more I ask around the more I find that amputees are everywhere. They also seemed, for the most part, very active.

A recent fishing trip in 2002



## **DECISION**

Then there were the doubts and unanswered questions in the mind of my immediate friends and family who no doubt thought I was slightly off my rocker for wanting to get my leg chopped off. Combine this with a work situation not conducive to taking extended sick leave, periods of high anxiety and the increasing pain I was suffering each and every day all made my decision doubly difficult. And perhaps my biggest fear was not so much for the physical issues but more for the physiological impact of such surgery, could I in fact take this level of shock full well knowing that I have unresolved life issues and a known high anxiety problem.

Anyway, my many professional and life successes are not due to sitting on the fence or waffling in indecision so I just got on with it.

## **INFORM CO-WORKERS**

The first step I took was to inform my fellow coworkers that I was dealing with severe pain issues and was expecting to have a leg amputation sometime in the next year. I also requested some personal space in order to reduce my stress levels. This worked out very well as I got cooperation in reducing and distributing my workload plus got things well organized for an extended leave of absence. I was also made familiar with the various extended medical plans, short-term disability payments, etc. which put my mind greatly at ease on the financial front.

## **RECEIVE COUNSELING**

The second step I took was to get counseling to deal with my anxiety problem. I didn't want any extra burden on my mind either before or after this pending procedure. I'd also read that physiological problems could sometimes be magnified after a trauma such as a limb amputation. Getting this treatment turned out to be the best decision of all because it ended up dealing with a series of issues beyond simple anxiety, as I'll attempt to explain. I've never known why I had anxiety problems; they were always there as far back as I can remember. The only outward manifestation would be an occasional tremor in my voice but inwardly I would have a pounding heart and shortness of breath. This could last for hours; days even, and affected my perception of reality and in particular prioritization of day-to-day problems at work or at home. It was triggered by nothing, or occasionally by public speaking or important meetings, and was worse during times of high stress for real reasons. I had never sought help for it nor had I taken any drugs stronger than over the counter Kava Kava to deal with it. Kava Kava has since been taken off the shelves for possible links to liver damage, not a good idea to go that route.

The counselor I went to see was a lady a friend recommended by the name of Carol Siebert. She had an easy manner and I quickly found it was easy to open up and talk on any subject. I knew I had a problem, knew I needed help, so we got on with it and made rapid progress over the several months of weekly sessions. The first thing we did was go over my history as a child and later as an adult with particular attention to known high impact events such as my cancer and much later the time I spent in the Middle East while serving in the military. The military years were not an issue but we soon ran into mental roadblocks in and around my bout with cancer way back when I was just eleven years old. Something there was of such a horrific nature that I

just couldn't bring myself to remember. It was if there was a hidden room in my mind that had a small window where I could take short little peeks through but anything beyond that was mentally distressing. So, armed with old pictures my family dug up, and some light trances brought about with the help of something called a Theratapper (see <http://www.theratapper.com/>) we relived that period of time in greater detail and opened that window ever wider. I came to the conclusion that one thing I never did when I was a boy was grieve for what had happened to me, so grieve I did – for that poor little boy that was me. And guess what, almost instantly no more anxiety attacks and my general anxiety levels are way down to what I expect is normal for most people. Amazing!

## **KNOW YOUR SURGEON & PROSTHETIST**

The next step we did was also an important one. Facing up to a voluntary amputation involves taking some steps. One is seeing your surgeon and giving him written permission to chop a part of your body off, not as easy as you might think. The other is actually going to the hospital to have it done, harder yet. Again, while in a light trance, Carol and I went over this period of time many times to live and relive the experience before hand. We also reinforced the positives about the amputation, a life without pain and the ability to walk and be far more mobile than I was in the past. This helped a lot as when it came time to take these steps I was as mentally prepared and as positive as I could be.

## **INVOLVE YOUR FAMILY**

While all this was going on I tried to prepare my immediate family for our pending change in life. My wife and daughter had some idea of what I was going through but were getting very anxious and worried about what was happening. I decided the best course of action would be to take them down to the GF Strong rehabilitation facility one day and have the staff show them what it was all about and what to expect. I had done this before myself and it helped. My family had a lot of questions and I think many of their own anxieties were laid to rest. We also visited and picked a permanent Prosthetist and he showed us the various leg designs and how all that worked. I also visited my child's teacher and informed him there was a pending crisis and to keep an eye on her for any unusual behavior. This last action helped as she did have some crying spells at school and the teacher gave her the necessary space to deal with it.

My feeling is that you can't underestimate the positive effect of having one's family involved in this process early on or the negative effect if you don't. Having to handle your own personal crisis plus having to do crisis management on the people around you is just way too much for anyone to handle. Any amputation is a traumatic process and we learned that doing everything and anything to minimize that trauma could only be a positive for the outcome.

Visiting the Prosthetist before surgery also enables you to have your foot measured so you can have some components of the leg pre-ordered and made to your specification. This saves a lot of time and trouble later on when you're on crutches and not so mobile. And buy some white running shoes suitable for a gym, the type that doesn't have high ankles. Give one to your Prosthetist so he/she can use it to fit your new foot.

Getting the paperwork signed at the surgeon's office was the next step. This was easier than I thought and the surgeon left me with the impression I was doing the right thing. There was also a large sense of relief at having passed what I considered a major milestone. Surgery was booked for a month later, not too long of a wait and also a relief given the long waiting lists I kept hearing about in the news.

## **THEWAIT**

Not easy. I kept busy with work and hobbies and kept planning for post surgery. This was a tough time, perhaps the toughest for both my family and myself. I did my best to avoid any and all negatives in my life and focus on the positive outcome and what I would be able to do once this was all over. This was cruel at times because people around me were getting emotional and stressed and often my best course of action would be to just walk away, often for a day or two. I found I needed personal space with few emotional distractions, even to the point of avoiding watching anything remotely depressing on TV.

## **SURGERY DAY**

Not much sleep the night before but that was OK, I expected to sleep lots the first day so it didn't matter. I had my father drive us in, was too tired and distracted to drive safely and having the company was reassuring. We went up to my room, a private one as I keep odd hours. I took a laptop in with me so I could get on the Internet and keep busy. Other than a nurse who had the worst needle injection skills on the face of the planet, things went well and I felt surprisingly calm right up to the surgery. Around this time I was having some conversations, complete with expletives, with my bad leg, something along the lines of good-bye and good riddance. May have helped, who knows – but I was glad to get rid of it nonetheless.

## **THE OPERATION**

I was asked if I wanted a general anesthetic or spinal. The spinal offered me a chance not to suffer from some of the often less than desirable side effects of a general anesthetic, nausea mostly. And yes, I was awake the whole time but something they gave me caused my short-term memory to completely fail. I can remember nothing after the faintest of needle pricks in my back and was clear headed and awake two and a half hours later. I was surprised at how fast I got kicked out of the hospital, three days – probably from me complaining bitterly about the food or the loud crowds of friends and family packed into this small hospital room creating quite the racket. And the food is bad, real bad. Make sure you have a Yellow Pages book on hand so you can order something edible, or have friends come in to wheel you down to the hospital cafeteria that always serves much better food. The pain from the surgery was not as bad as I had imagined. I was off Morphine and onto Tylenol only three days after surgery. Psychologically I felt great and my stress levels were low. Now it was just a matter of waiting for the staples to come out so I could get fitted with a prosthetic and get on my feet again!

## **POST SURGERY**

Changing the bandages and cleaning the stump area took a little getting used to, it was kind of gross however you look at it - but we managed. We were told to use nothing more than a sterile salt-water solution and to avoid the sutured area. What was painful and hard to deal with was phantom pain from the old limb. I was told pre-surgery this may be an issue, and it is for a significant percentage of amputees but I was caught somewhat unprepared by the intensity. Normal pain killing drugs don't work on phantom limb pain. However, there are some types of drugs that can help reduce some of the more intense kinds of pain you may experience. Make sure you have your doctor's phone number handy so you can have the prescription phoned in to the drug store of your choice right away. Phantom limb pain, for me, took a couple of months to abate and was my single most worrisome post-surgery issue. The pain went away within short weeks of wearing and walking with my new prosthetic, something that is the norm I gather, and now I'm left with what I like to call phantom annoyances. I can still feel my old leg and some of the sensations are a still little odd. Like everything else in this process, however, you get used to them and you rarely ever think about it unless the subject comes up.

## **THE NEW LEG**

Your stump will still be large and perhaps a little swollen when it comes time to get fitted with your new leg. Get some loose jogging pants, the ones with zippers up the side that are easy to remove, and wear shorts underneath. Both your Prosthetist and your Physiotherapist will want to see your leg every day for the next few weeks, often every few minutes when you're trying out activities that put any stress on your stump area. Shorts are a must. And there is no reason to be shy about having a prosthetic, there will be lots of nice people around you that also have them and you'll find that it later becomes, oddly enough, your new leg becomes an object of pride.

But hey! Believe me, it's all smiles when you take those first steps even if you're using crutches for support.

I was a little put off by the size of the stump socket with my first prosthetic. It was so large that I couldn't wear my usual pair of jeans, couldn't fit the prosthetic into them. It was jogging pants or shorts and that was it. And the weight was heavy, lots of padding and some pretty thick plastic. I learned that these things are all temporary and that as your stump shrinks so does the socket - and it's amazing how much and how fast that happens. And you need all that padding this early in the process believe me.. I went through four legs in three months. By the second one I was back into my jeans and never gave it a thought again.

## **SHOES**

When you have no immediate and simple means of changing the angle of your foot to the ground, changing shoes becomes an issue that you need to be aware of. The change in your shoe's heel height will disturb your balance and will either push you forward or backward. I had my most popular and comfortable long distance walking shoes setup for my prosthetic and then pads placed in my other shoes to align them all to fit. Works great!

## **SKIN**

Putting all that weight on areas of your leg never before used for that function does take its early toll on skin. Being clean and dry is number one. Being "at one" with your skin and noticing every little pain, nuance, bump, red mark is another. Even a slight abrasion can make walking painful so I treat it immediately and stay off of it for the duration if necessary. Your Prosthetist can get you some skin creams that help greatly with the healing. Later on your skin gets used to its new roll in life and you can back off on the babying.

## **DRUGS & PAIN**

I will tell you right now that I don't like drugs of any kind and only use them as a last resort. Virtually all painkillers have some side effects on the mind and this makes me personally uncomfortable. Even a slightly foggy brain is just not on for me but for you things may be different. This should be a discussion between you and your doctor but it was my experience that I felt much better once I got off the pain and phantom pain control drugs. There should be no pain or discomfort with your leg and your prosthetic if you're doing everything right and have no other issues.

## **SHOCK & TRAUMA**

From personal experience I can tell you bluntly not to treat lightly what an amputation, or any serious surgery for that matter, does to your mind and your body. For me it was probably five or six months before I was able to return to some sense of near normality in my mental processes. Physically I was in fine form but I had trouble holding a line of thought and my short-term memory was severely degraded. If you have employment or do functions that require a lot of concentration, focus or analytical abilities you may want to be cautious about your expectations of returning to those activities right away. Plan for some serious post surgery time outs and treat yourself to some long vacations after you're on your feet again.

## **SUPPORT TEAM**

Your support team: If there is a secret to a great recovery from an amputation it's in having a great working relationship with your support team (Physiatrist, Physiotherapist, Prosthetist). I found it useful to write down regular personal progress reports and e-mail them in. You also have to be open and honest in all things from your state of mind to the physical health of the rest of your body. This level of communication means you will get the right treatment at exactly the right time. It's also important to listen to that team and make sure you understand what they are saying. If necessary write down any medical terms or jargon you're having difficulty understanding and get on the net to find out what they mean. And make sure you do as you're told as these people are professionals and you are most decidedly not. I quickly found out that there is a lot more to this than meets the eye. Educate yourself and you'll find out that dealing with amputees and amputations is a science all on its own. It might seem odd to be standing on one leg while playing with a ball in the other but, each item - no matter how trivial it may seem to you, is vitally important in the process of retraining your brain to walk properly with a prosthetic. I often bet unknowing souls that I can scratch the back of my head with my toes then proceed to take off my leg and do just that.

Dale climbing radio tower in backyard 2002

