

Surgery Recovery

By Mark Lawton

It's now week six of my recovery from shoulder surgery (repair of the rotator cuff). I'm so impressed by the empathy that I receive from friends and even from strangers. Everybody wants to know just what happened and why I have this thirty pound gray suitcase tucked under my arm (low tech shoulder immobilizer). The other day I was riding down an escalator, the only one in Portland, and a stranger was riding up the other side. As he approaches he scans me from shoulder to fingertips and says, "rotator cuff." I give the secret nod they taught me in the hospital and continue on down.

I've learned that the language of sympathy requires a bit of decoding. When a colleague asks: "What happened do your arm?" It really means, "Do you have twenty minutes, I'd like to tell you about the surgery I had." Everybody, it seems, has a shoulder injury and wont miss an opportunity to usurp my fifteen minutes of misery fame to tell me about his.

Since nobody is actually interested in my story I streamline my answers. I

skip the "Last summer, I was cruising up this really hard rock-climbing route and then" And instead, I go right to "Oh, it's nothing. You must have or know somebody with an injury. Any injury whatsoever would be interesting. It will really make my pain go away. Oh come now. There must be something. Perhaps your niece has tennis elbow."

Normally at this time of year I'd be running a marathon or two, climbing Mt. Everest, or swimming the English Channel. Unfortunately, I've had to find new forms of exercise. The latest and greatest discovery is at our local pool. They have a track where the water circulates rapidly in a circle. In the morning, it's open for adults to walk against the current. That's what I do and I made a lot of friends already. Most of the clientele are, however, eighty year old women. Ethyl, for example, tells me that she was the chief librarian in Des Moines during the Hoover administration. She walks on Mondays and Thursdays. On Tuesdays I'm joined by Gertrude who claims to have been Ronald Reagan's babysitter. These women are tough. As I circumnavigate the track, arm buoyed by my special water-resistant sling, the old gals lap me on a regular basis. "Keep it up boy," they say. "When I had my surgery in '46 we didn't even have swimming pools." Or, "Looking

good sonny, you'll be catching Mabel soon."

Since I joined the geriatric training circuit I realized that old people speak their own language. In the locker room, I met Charles. "Charles," he says, "Not Chuck. Chuck's a cut of meat. I only go by Charles." "Okay. It's nice to meet you Chuck." He doesn't hear but notices me engaged in the daily battle buttoning my shirt. "What happened to your wing there boy?" I give the usual concise answer. "Oh, it's nothing. I had surgery x weeks ago and it's doing fine."

"Well kid," he says. "Just make sure you take good care of it. A guy's got to be patient for things to mend right."

"A guy," I think. Who says "a guy?" "Mend?" I realize that Charles, being an old guy, speaks old guy English.

My family has been particularly supportive during my convalescence. When

I got home from the hospital they attended to my every need. Ann brought me snacks in bed and Jules turned the pages as I read. Of course, over time, it's hard for a guy to demand sustained attention and the level has dropped a bit. Yesterday, for example, I said, "Ann, could you get my blue shirt off the top shelf?" She glances up from her Metropolis magazine, looks at the closet, then out the window and says "It's a nice day today. You don't need a shirt."

Initially she was annoyed that I used my injury as an excuse not to do my normal six hours of daily cleaning. After a week, however, she noticed that the house was actually cleaner. Lately, she says things like "How's your other shoulder doing? Maybe it's time to have that one looked at. A guy might as well have everything taken care of at once."

Keep in touch,

Mark, A guy living in Portland