

PLAYING PERSPECTIVE

DEALING WITH INJURY NATHAN HARRIS



ALL BLACKS HOOKER NATHAN HARRIS KNOWS FIRST-HAND WHAT IT IS LIKE TO ACHIEVE YOUR BOYHOOD DREAM OF BECOMING AN ALL BLACK – ONLY TO HAVE IT SHATTERED BY INJURY, NOT ONCE BUT TWICE.

The 24-year-old hooker injured his ankle in Chicago in 2014, while playing in only his second test match in the black jersey.

He was on a massive high having just scored his first try. A few minutes into play after the restart, Nathan saw an opportunity and ran 20 metres to get into position to catch the ball. He received a terrible pass, which landed at his feet, so he kicked the ball and then got pulled back by an opposing player. Nathan went down like he had been shot by a sniper. He had done his ankle. Nathan shares his story:

My initial thoughts were this is incredibly sore. Well, actually the language was a bit more colourful than that, but I thought I had rolled my left ankle. The medical staff came over and did a few tests then heavily strapped it, and I tried to get up and convince myself I was okay. I was able to run, which was purely due to the adrenaline in my body.

A few minutes later I couldn't turn on my foot, so I signalled that I needed to be replaced. I came off and watched the rest of the game.

I saw an ankle surgeon from Chicago in the changing room who said I had ruptured my medial ligament in my foot. Upon hearing that I was in a bit of shock.

I got sent home two days later, which was gut-wrenching. It was then that it sunk in that I would have to have surgery. I saw the surgeon in

Tauranga and the reality hit home that it was going to be a long process.

My dad was a good source of support, and he just made me focus on the fact that I was young and would come back from it. Dad was right, but it was still a bitter pill to swallow.

A week later I had surgery. Then I had to sit on my backside for a month, which was really hard to take when I had been training constantly for the last few years. I have never had that amount of time off, so I had to learn to fill in my time. I surrounded myself with family and friends who tried to keep me upbeat and not let me dwell on it.

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I used that time to concentrate on my off-field life. I consulted my Personal Development Manager, Judy Clement, and we made a plan. I got into a bit of property development, which I found a really interesting experience as it was the first house I had built. I also did some charity work, which gave me a good perspective on how lucky I am. There are people out there who need help so I just wanted to do my bit.

I was getting up at around 5am to stretch out in the morning before training so I could give myself the best chance I could to recover properly. At around six months post-surgery, when I was getting near to returning to play, I was doing some finer touches like fending and game-specific sprints when I noticed pain in the balls of my toes on my left foot.

I told the physios and went off for a scan, and was told my return to play would be set back another three to four months. I was just lost!

I didn't know what to do, I was so close to getting back to play and now I felt it was slipping away. I was really, really down and it took a lot more inner strength to deal with it. I had lots of thoughts going through my head. Do I retire or do I guts it out? What was going to make me happier: playing club rugby and working my way back to live my dream to the full potential or finding a new career?

The rugby won and my passion drove me to refocus on my recovery.

I missed out on the 2015 Rugby World Cup and that was a hard pill to swallow, but the boys winning it was hugely satisfying. After every match I watched, I would go for a run and it motivated me to train harder to get back there.

I would have already done a full day's training but I would still do a run after the match to help ease my frustration of not being out there, which I was still struggling with. I found the exercise was good not only for the body but also for the mind.

When I played my first Investec Super Rugby game, it is fair to say I was incredibly nervous. I got through it and then managed to work my way back into the All Blacks, which was such a satisfying feeling.

I had a head knock during the Super Rugby season, so sat out with concussion for a month, which made me think that I wasn't going to make it back into the All Blacks. But, when my health came right, I just tried to empty the tank for that last month to earn selection so I wouldn't have any regrets.

When I got called back into the squad, I was over the moon. I felt really happy for my family and friends who had supported me during some very dark days. However, there were more dark days to come.



Nathan scores a try in Chicago, 2014.

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My next injury happened on tour in Australia, prior to the first Bledisloe game this year. We had a good week leading up to it and I had been named to start. I was in a good state physically and mentally. On the Thursday afternoon, we had a training session and we were doing some footwork into contact and I popped my ACL in my right knee. I went down again just the same, like I had been shot. I just thought "F@&K! What have I done this time?"

I was keen to get moving and I got up and walked away, but the medical team's quick assessment confirmed my worst thoughts.

I watched the end of training with all these thoughts of "Why did this happen to me?" and, internally, I went to a dark place. I had done everything by the book and then this happened. I was devastated.

So it was a plane home again and more surgery. This was a tough one to take, but I have a mate who is going through chemotherapy, and he gives me perspective. I have to be grateful and use it as motivation as there really is someone worse off than me.

I feel like I have unfinished business still trying to chase my dream, so I just simply have to focus on what I need to do to get back on the field. After surgery to reattach the ACL, I am now back on the rehab road.

Through my experiences I have learned that life can be very challenging, but just take every day as it comes and be grateful for what you have. Live in the moment and enjoy what you do.

Yes, it is hard to stay positive and you will have dark days, but surround yourself with good people. Make the most of your time off the field by setting things up for life after rugby, because you never know when that injury could be career-ending.

People don't see the hard road behind the scenes of injury, the loneliness of recovery and the commitment it takes to get back, but if you do make it back it is hugely rewarding because you appreciate it more. Those people who have helped you during your injury also come along on that journey of recovery with you and get enjoyment out of seeing you make it back on the field.

I am grateful to everyone that had an impact and helped me and I want to really thank them for their support through both the dark and the light days.

SUPPORT

Players should never feel embarrassed about asking for assistance or help. People to go to for help include:

- Friends, family members or a trusted confidante
- The team's Personal Development Manager
- The coach or CEO of the provincial union
- The team doctor
- Your own personal doctor if you would prefer not to discuss the issues with your team doctor
- NZRPA via 0800 Player
- Confidential free independent professional support for contracted players via InStep on 0800 284 678, or other independent support programmes such as Lifeline 0800 543 354

Not seeking help for mental health problems is a major issue for players and non-players alike. Early identification and intervention for mental health problems is extremely important, as this can mean less disruption to a player's life and quicker recovery. Remember: a problem shared is a problem halved.

See page 88 for information on New Zealand Rugby's new mental well-being website called HeadFirst, which will be launched early in 2017.