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When Minor Becomes Major

Tim Burke pushes through nagging shoulder pain and learns an important lesson about caring for the body.

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All photos courtesy of Tim Burke and Rob Orlando/Hybrid Athletics

For almost nine months prior to finally tearing my rotator cuff, I had been experiencing pain and discomfort in my right shoulder.

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At first it was just slight inflammation and soreness. Ample amounts of ice and Advil seemed to work fine at that point. I would rest it for a few days, let it heal and then get right back to work. Not all movements would cause pain; pull-ups, muscle-ups, snatches and heavy overhead movements seemed to be the main culprits. Slowly, these movements became harder and harder to perform.

Before I knew it, the pain had really started to become a problem. It became almost constant and would keep me awake through all hours of the night with burning and shooting pain. Ironically, I felt like I hadn't lost any strength, so I kept pushing. After four months it became apparent that something was truly wrong with the shoulder. Despite all these symptoms hindering my body, I still had not seen a doctor. I figured I knew the answer: rest it. But I couldn't rest because sectionals were right around the corner and it was time to really pick up the pace.

I was determined to go as hard as possible, and I was not going to let a “minor” injury stop me.

I maintained my rigorous training schedule right up to the week before sectionals, ignoring any pain I felt. Having a great opportunity to place top three, I was determined to go as hard as possible, and I was not going to let a “minor” injury stop me. After a brutal first day, I went home and had terrible pain that I had never felt before. It was 10 times worse than the previous months. I also could not lift my arm past 90 degrees. This is when I finally realized something was seriously wrong with me.

I iced and tried to get my rest for the next day. Day 2 came and I pushed the pace even more. When the competition was over, I was top 10, but not top three as expected. I wondered what I had done to myself. All the snatches, pull-ups and overhead squats had destroyed my shoulder. I waited almost 10 days before getting an MRI in hopes that it would start to feel better. Unfortunately it didn't, and I reluctantly scheduled the MRI.



After ignoring increasing pain, Tim Burke was forced to finally take care of his shoulder.

The test revealed a 75 percent tear of the supraspinatus tendon, which is one of the largest tendons in the rotator. It mostly supports external rotation. My doctor was quick to tell me we needed to schedule surgery to repair the shoulder. I figured I would give it a week and weigh all my options. Only two remained: I could let the tendon completely tear off the bone or go through with the dreaded surgery, which would result in a long recovery. It became clear what had to be done. After researching and finding as much information on the rotator cuff and the recovery time, I called the doctor and told him I was ready.

Mandatory Down Time

Surgery was scheduled for May 28, the week after regionals. There was no way I could do regionals, so I withdrew and watched from the sidelines. I could not believe it had gotten to that point. I have been an athlete all my life, playing sports competitively through high school and college. I had never been injured, let alone had any surgery of any kind. To sit and watch regionals was heartbreaking. I felt like all the hard work, training and dieting was for nothing. Thinking about the “what ifs” of surgery had me

just plain old scared. What if I never regained complete range of motion? What if I never completely regained my strength? Would I ever be back to normal? All these questions were constantly flowing through my mind every second of every day.

Surgery week finally came, and I was anxious and almost excited to finally get it repaired. I thought I would be out for two months and back to power cleaning and overhead pressing within three months. I was wrong. The first night after the procedure was the single worst night of my life. The doctors had told me the pain would be really intense. Being a tough guy—at least I thought I was tough—I figured, “How bad could it be?”

Once the numbness wore off, it was almost unbearable to the point that I wanted to go to the hospital and be put to sleep. I loaded up on the Percocet, but they did nothing for the pain. All I wanted to do was sit down. It hurt so badly I had to just pace around. The pills had me so woozy I could not walk straight. I had no idea what to do with myself. It was such a helpless feeling. Because I could not lie flat, I would prop myself up on the couch with tons of pillows and try to sleep. The next four days were spent pacing around the house at all hours of the night and sleeping for maybe 10-minute intervals.

My wife was such an angel throughout the whole ordeal. She stayed up with me at night and made sure I was as comfortable as possible. It killed her to see me like that, and I would see her start to tear up as I winced in pain. It absolutely broke my heart to see her so upset for me. I will never forget what she did for me.

A week after surgery, I took the huge bandage off my shoulder. I was amazed at what atrophy had done to my

arm and shoulder. Being a 195-lb. CrossFitter and right-handed, I once had a big bicep and shoulder. Not anymore. I quickly earned nicknames at the gym like Spaghetti Wing and—my favorite—Baby Arm. I was told the muscle would come back, but I didn't believe it. As I write this, at the four-month mark, I have regained that bicep and most of my shoulder, thankfully!

At two weeks it became easier to sleep through the night. I still could not lie flat and wasn't able to get in my bed for almost a month. I also decided to stop taking the pain pills. They were not doing anything for me except making me dependent on them. The doctor told me to slowly reduce the dosage, but I went cold turkey and just stopped. At first, they did a good job helping me get to sleep. After stopping the pain meds I began having trouble sleeping. I figured lack of sleep was better than developing an addiction to painkillers.

The stretching exercises were awful. I would rather have been beaten with a bat.

Physical therapy had begun at Week 2. In the beginning it consisted of heat, ice and electric stimulation. After the combination of those three therapies, they would stretch me out. This is where all the pain came back. The stretching exercises were awful. I would rather have been beaten with a bat. I was determined to heal faster than the average



By training the rest of his body while his shoulder healed, Burke was able to maintain at least some of his strength and conditioning.



A willingness to push through pain might have put Burke in the hospital in the first place, but it probably helped him speed through his rehab after surgery.

person and made the therapists push the stretching to my breaking point. They recommended I get back on the pain pills because the shoulder would be really sore from all the movement. I politely declined and dealt with it naturally.

Back at It

At three weeks I felt it was time to start working out again. I began with slow movements like back squats, single-arm dumbbell presses and single-arm bench presses. I was performing these movements while in the sling, and other members would look at me like I was nuts. They didn't understand that I was on a mission to not let this stop me. I was going to train every part of my body except my right arm.

Squatting in a Sling: 405 lb. Triple

Therapy was going really well, and I started pushing the intensity of my daily workouts. This is when I suffered my first setback. During one exercise I lifted my arm a little too high and felt a pinch, pop and sharp pain. I was terrified that the muscle had torn again and I would have to go

back into surgery. For almost a week I sweated it out until my next doctor's appointment. He explained it could have been scar tissue and it would be sore and weak for a few more days. He instructed me to stay in the sling for an extra two weeks. Total sling time was seven weeks.

I was now adding met-cons to my training and picking up the pace. Still in the sling, I began box jumps, GH sit-ups, single-arm kettlebell swings and running. I had heard that unilateral training was highly effective in both healthy and injured athletes. Whatever was being done on one side would transfer to the other. I was looking for the testosterone release throughout my entire body. It did not matter that it was only coming from the left side. I believe this played a huge factor in healing and regaining my strength so quickly.

At eight weeks, my therapist had me strengthening the shoulder. I was out of the sling and could lift my arm to almost halfway. I began doing knee push-ups and other movements that isolated external rotation of the shoulder. Band work was also a big part of the process.



"I was going to train every part of my body except my right arm."—Tim Burke

Little by little, it started feeling better and better. At 12 weeks I was able to totally lift my arm above my head with minimal pain at the very top of the lockout. It was such a great morale boost to actually use my right arm, even if it did hurt like hell.

Renewed Intensity

I am now at the four-month mark. I have begun power cleaning, deadlifting and pressing. All these movements are performed with light to moderate weight. I have also been working in more strongman movements like tire flips, atlas-stone work and yoke carries. My shoulder feels great, and I have minimal pain. I figure I am about 75 percent as strong as I was prior to injury. I try to be as careful as possible, but once a week I get the urge to try something heavy—power cleaning 225 for reps, flipping the 740-lb. tire and deadlifting 405. It actually feels great, and I do not have any pain performing these movements. The shoulder just feels weak, but lifting gives me a feeling like I've accomplished something great and lets me know that things are starting to come together.

I have stopped therapy at the doctor's office but continue on my own. Being a full-time trainer here at Hybrid Athletics provides me with plenty of opportunity for rehab. I take 15 minutes in between classes or privates to do a few stretches or movements.

Over the next three to six months, I plan to really step it up. I have been taking an aggressive approach to my rehab and will continue to do so. I am constantly trying to build strength in my right shoulder. I started with single-arm dumbbell shoulder and bench presses. This will build strength not only in the shoulder but all the stabilizing muscles surrounding it. At first it was hard to press a 20-lb. dumbbell. Now at almost 5 months, I am up to slowly strict pressing the 50-lb. dumbbell.

Stretching is also a big part of rehab. The shoulder can tighten up really quickly if it isn't constantly stretched. To regain my full range of motion, I have to stretch as much as possible, sometimes twice a day. Push-ups are also playing a big part in my therapy. I can get close to 20 consecutively. It does not hurt after that point; it just feels weak. Little by little I am able to do more as the weeks progress.

When everything is healed and painless (hopefully six to eight months), I hope to be back into the full swing of things. It's my barbell strength that will need to improve. Getting my PRs back to where they were is going to be challenging. Push jerking 285, deadlifting 500+ and back squatting 455 should be great benchmarks to work back to. When I accomplish these numbers it will give me a feeling like I am finally back. Then it's time to train harder to break those PRs.

My met-con ability is already close to where it was before, and I don't have a problem with any lightweight barbell movements. Body-weight and light-barbell work is all I have been doing, and it is getting better fast. It's just the heavy lifts that will take time.

Surprisingly, the strongman implements are not a problem either. Most of those movements don't target the rotator directly, unless pressing the log is involved. Flipping the heavy tires and lifting the stones have not presented a problem.

After all is said and done I would love to make a push for the Games. It might take me another whole year to get there, but I am ready and willing to put in the time and hard work that are required to compete at the highest level.

Lessons Learned

I now believe the surgery was an absolute must and the best thing I could have done. A few months of pain and suffering compared to a lifetime of pain and weakness is a no-brainer. The most important thing I learned through this whole nightmare was to take care of myself—not only shoulders, but everything. It's not worth going through a surgery and a long recovery process just to shave a few seconds off my Fran time.

We recently taught a strongman seminar at Kelly Starrett's gym in San Francisco, and I had the chance to speak to him about my injury. He really helped me understand the reasons how and why my shoulder had gotten to this point. Tightness in my shoulders and pectoral musculature was forcing a rounded shoulder, which in turn caused a winged scapula. Compounded with violent shoulder extension during lightweight muscle snatches, kipping pull-ups and overhead squats, the connective tissue broke down over time.

Kelly explained that I needed to fix my posture in an attempt to balance out the musculature from anterior to posterior. He also said that if I didn't fix the imbalance, the problem would keep surfacing again and again. Kelly is a super-nice guy and very knowledgeable. His mobility certs and [blog](#) are a must for all CrossFitters. We should listen and practice what he preaches. It will only make us better athletes.

The one thing I would recommend to any and all CrossFitters is this: take care of yourself. Plenty of stretching and mobility wods will only help your recovery and overall well-being. As CrossFitters, we tend to ride the

fine line between just enough and total overkill. Rest is something that is always needed but rarely taken. If a body part is injured, just back off and rest even if you think it's something minor. After all, that's how my shoulder started out, as something minor. Minor turned to major, and major turned to surgery.

So in closing, I urge you to please careful, be smart and—above all—have fun!

Additional Videos

[Recovery WOD](#)

[Truck Push](#)

[Shoulder Presses](#)



About the author:

Tim Burke is 32 years old. He was born and raised in Stamford, Conn., and is a full-time trainer at [Hybrid Athletics](#). He has been involved in sports his whole life, and he was a high-school and college athlete who excelled at both football and wrestling. He has always loved pushing himself to the physical limit and welcomes any challenging workout, which is why CrossFit immediately drew him in. Hybrid and CrossFit have made for a life-changing experience. Being able to test his physical skills and constantly seeking improvement are what really attracted Tim to the sport, and switching careers from chef to full-time trainer was one of the best decisions of his life. He looks forward every day to teaching and motivating clients and finds it so rewarding to coach a new member through his or her first pull-ups or to help a veteran achieve a new PR. Tim is so thankful to have finally found what truly makes him happy.