

## My Rotator Cuff Runeth Over

In early January of this year, I was in my yard trying to roll a long 36" diameter log so that I could finish sawing it into stove wood lengths. I needed to roll it so that I could finish sawing the lower portion without cutting into the ground and thereby dulling my saw. This was made difficult because the log was frozen to the ground. Consequently I leaned into the peavey more than I should have, causing it to slip and me to fall backward. I don't remember feeling anything severe immediately occurring in my left shoulder, however it wasn't long before I felt the need to stop work and go in. By the time I was in the house I knew that I had done something to the shoulder because the pain continued growing in intensity all evening and affected my sleep.

Years ago I had experienced a similar pain in my right shoulder which seemed to have been caused by lifting and carrying too far, a log too big for my aging out-of-shape body. That had been bursitis and so I assumed that this was also. After a week or two when the pain had not at all abated I went to an acupuncturist. This provided no relief or functional improvement. Next I tried a very good chiropractor who had me commit to a minimum of one month of treatments after which he assured me that I should feel improvement. Nothing changed. During this period the problem remained quiet stable, but very debilitating. I could not lift my arm in any direction from a simple hanging position without severe and exponentially increasing pain as I tried to lift it. Even the natural swing of an arm during walking was painful. Any shoulder movement initiated by the shoulder muscles caused severe pain.

As time past, I developed compensating habits, which could allow some avoidance of the pain. When I walked or did much of anything, I carried my left hand in my pants pocket to prevent swinging it and to avoid its use. The strangest and most disturbing aspect of this infirmity occurred at night. Whenever I was in a prone position, a triple whammy would affect me. Sporadic spasms like knife jabs would stomp around my shoulder and sometimes even up and down my arm. Concurrently there would be a steady pulsing pain at heart beat frequency. Than as a third component there would be a steady dull

ache, which never quit. Needless to say sleep was impossible until exhaustion exceeded the discomfort. What was so strange was that if I sat up these pains stopped. The minute I layed down again they would resume, no matter what position I assumed. Also, of course, everytime I turned over I would have to carry the left arm into any new position by means of my right hand, because the left arm had not enough strength to move itself, and it's attempt to do so, caused severe pain.

In late February I gave up on the chiropractor and went to a sports medicine doctor. He immediately diagnosed the problem as a torn rotator cuff. A subsequent x-ray and ultrasound confirmed this and found that the tear was a little more than a centimeter in length. He indicated that the only way function and pain relief could be provided would be to tie the ripped tendon back to a pin, which would be anchored to the adjacent bone. I had never before heard of a rotator cuff. When the doctor spoke of it, I thought he said "cup" and went around for several days calling it that until I was corrected by someone familiar with sports ailments. I believed that a second opinion was appropriate, so I went to another specialist in these matters at Mass General Hospital, who recommended the same procedure. On this basis I made an appointment to have the work done. The doctor said it would be a three-hour operation requiring general anesthesia, and that my arm would be in a sling for several weeks, after which as much as 8 months of therapy would have to follow before my arm would again be normal.

In the meantime, I had become somewhat accustomed to being one-armed. I even finished sawing the several logs I had, split them into stove wood size and piled the wood with one hand in my pocket. While driving, if I wanted my left hand high on the steering wheel, I would have to lift it there with my other hand, or else suffer severe pain. The operation was scheduled for 8:00am on March the second. Around four o'clock the previous afternoon the doctor called to confirm that I was ready and would be on time. As soon as I hung up the phone, a very strong feeling came over me which seemed to tell me "don't do it." I fought with that for about fifteen minutes, but it wouldn't go away, so I called the doctor and "temporarily" cancelled the event.

Now what? While I didn't at this time hear him say it, it is likely that my deep subconscious could still hear what my dear old stepfather had said to me many times while I was growing up. "Quit babying yourself." "If you want to be a man, you have to act like one." The content of this admonition was of course much broader than simply dealing with pain. It ran the entire spectrum of what then was a measure of manhood. It included many things ranging from simple courtesy and gentleness to women, to unflinching response to danger, and to unyielding responsibility to work and family. At any rate that is what I chose to do, to stop babying myself. It was very simple, whatever movement hurt, I forced it to hurt, a little at a time over and over again, each time a little more. I don't know if it was what happened next, or if it was my inclination to do this, but one or the other was I'm sure, a supernatural event. And I can not help but somehow relate it to the supernatural aspect of my cure from a terminal cancer now over, four years ago.

At any rate, I soon discovered that the more I induced pain, by forcing the arm movement the weaker the pain became for many of these movements. Soon I could raise my arm to shoulder level with very little pain, and way up over my head with considerable pain. But, I could do it! Where previously it had been all but impossible. It was also strange, especially at the beginning, where it seemed that I would advance my mobility two steps each day but fell back one and a half step each night. In other words, each morning it was better than the morning before, but not nearly as good as it had been the evening before. Nevertheless, the half steps accumulated, and soon I was reaching top shelves in the kitchen with almost no pain and splitting wood with both arms without any pain. The night pain also disappeared. I don't believe it took more than 4 weeks of this activity before I was 80% fully functional and 70% pain free. Today, for all practical purposes, I believe that I am at least 95% fully functional, and probably 90% pain free. That 10% is confined to some minor movements and to just a hint of discomfort in a number of others. I don't know how much better it can get, probably not much. So I doubt that it will ever be perfect. But what is? If I had been 40 years younger, perhaps the pin and tie job would have been more appropriate. On the other hand, I've heard stories of pin and

tie failures with patients left worse off than before. As it now is I can live with it very well and do not regret my decision.

As I look back it seems ever more clear that the strong and strange feeling that I had when I changed my mind about the operation, was the Lord's way of telling me "I'll take care of it." And He did!

What is written here is simply a narration of my particular experience, nothing more. Please note that I neither condemn nor condone the repair of rotator cuffs, because my knowledge of the matter from which to make this judgement is inadequate. In my case, my chosen regimen served me well. That may not be true for others.

Update February 2002:

Today and at least for a year or more the shoulder has been totally functional and pain free, so much that I never even think about it because there is no evidence in terms of pain, mobility or strength to remind me that it ever happened.

Update June 2008:

It's now been 8 ½ years since the event and my arm remains perfectly normal, as if nothing had ever happened. In fact, it was all but forgotten until a recent clean up of old computer files reminded me of this paper, and now it seems very appropriate to add it to this website.