

499 days

By Jacqui Cooper
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A day where dreams were dashed

It was a grim day for me, the day I blew out my knee and broke my leg on the world's greatest sporting stage; the SLC 2002 Winter Olympic Games. World number 1 for the 3 years prior to those Olympic Games had me pinned as the favourite for the gold medal. Injuring my knee the day before the semi-final meant that any hope of competing in those Olympic Games was crushed; the dream was over. I knew at that point that I was faced with a very long hard road ahead. At that point I wasn't sure what was going to be harder for me; not competing in an event I was favourite for, or knowing I was about to face the hardest physical and mental challenge of my life.

Not swings and roundabouts, just merry go rounds

The path to the recovery for any elite athlete is difficult. The feeling of loneliness, being lost, lacking confidence, and despair is all very real. I describe it like I had been on an athletic merry go round for 10 years and all of a sudden I was kicked off. I had to stand back and watch the ride still go round and round but I couldn't get on. I couldn't get back on that ride for a long time; 499 days to be exact. For 499 days I hung onto a hope, that one day I could be good again; good at something I had invested my heart and soul into for nearly half my life.

Proving you can teach old dog new tricks

Some days that hope was lost a little when doctors told me it was impossible, it was irresponsible and to re-think my life in sport and dream a different dream. That hope also died a little more when coaches, team-mates and sports programs had moved on and past Jacqui Cooper. I was determined to re-enter my sport rebuilding myself technically, mentally and physically; a tough ask for any injured athlete, particularly one in their early 30's. I had to come-back better than I was.

During those 499 days I had 4 operations; each operation carefully planned to rebuild my leg. At each hurdle, I dug deeper knowing that at the end of all of this, even if it meant that I only got to spend 1 more day back on that merry go round, then the pain of watching that ride go by without me was worth it. Just for a moment, I would get to feel what it was like to be me again.

How you handle adversity is a sign of your strength of character

That day in SLC I was broken; my leg was broken but my spirit was not. That day in SLC, my dream was broken but my heart was not.

499 days later I was able to somersault again. 930 days later I competed at my first World Cup back; rebuilt and reinvented. Winning a silver medal at that event was the beginning of a new life. I felt re-born; I extended my career by 6 years and went on to record my greatest winning streak, capturing 10 more World Cup victories, 2 more World Cup Championships and multiple World Records.

To me, resilience is a quality that you have on reflection. You don't start out knowing you have it; it's an idea that you can do something, even when for a short amount of time it looks like there is no hope; it's an idea that you can be better. It's something that keeps you going even when others have lost hope in you.