

KNEEHAB

My story and hacks

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My left knee in all its glory. Pre-injury ski touring at Snowfall Lodge, BC



Heli rescue out of Icefall Lodge, BC.

"You're not going to believe this," I radioed to the lead guide downslope of me this past winter, "but, I think I *also* just busted my knee." There was a pause on the radio and I sat down in the deep snow with my skis. "Ok, can you bear weight on it?" the response came, "it's your call if we need the heli." I was working a tailguiding shift at Snowfall Lodge, a ski touring operation south of Rogers Pass. About an hour before this radio call, on the same slope with the same group under the same sky, the lead guide went down with a busted ACL and a few choice words. I sat there, considering the decision and was half-laughing and shaking my head in disbelief. As if this is happening? When have the lead and tailguide both injured themselves on the same run on the same day? It felt too unbelievable to be true. So, I stood up to see if I could bear any weight. My knee felt more like a swimming pool than a solid joint. It was definitely true. With the weather moving in, a group of 6 guests, fading daylight and two injured staff, we called in a heli-vac.

I spent most of my life as a cross-country ski racer representing Canada at the 2014 Olympics and more recently the Swiss National Team internationally. I retired from the racing scene in 2018, but I still consider myself to still be relatively fit. I go to the gym with the sole motivation of injury prevention. The holy invincible crown I once wore now looks more like the shaved head of a monk. I finished the 2020 ski season skiing delicious Kootenay powder in my post-operation dreams on a hospital bed in the Banff Mineral Springs hospital. It wasn't the backcountry trip I had in mind for that spring, but as the world closed its doors around me due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the hospital bed didn't seem so bad.

Hack #1: XC Sitskiing

Post-injury and pre-surgery, I challenged myself to stay positive, stay sane and get my knee in as good of shape as possible for surgery. The incredible staff at Trail Sports in Canmore introduced me to cross-country sit skiing. This was a game changer! With a third degree tear of my MCL and ACL diagnosis from Dr. Heard, I was given a surgery date 6-weeks after the date of injury. The goal was to allow the MCL repair itself and reduce the swelling. Initially, icing and elevation were the recovery priorities. My kneecap remained stiff throughout, my knee was swollen and my leg felt compromised and weak. When I was outdoors, I wore a range of motion brace to protect my MCL and prevent my knee going into hyperflexion. 5 weeks post-injury, I was sitting at 0-120 degrees of flexion and focusing on hamstring abduction, gentle spin biking and light weight bearing (often with a cane).

During this pre-surgery, post-injury rehab time, sit skiing was an incredible outlet! I could still glide on snow yet instead of the mindless climbing effort I was used to, I barely made it out of the ski stadium. Meeting the sport I know so well from the viewpoint of a lawn chair on skis epitomizes humble.



Attempted ripping on the xc sit-ski from Trail Sports in Canmore.
Photo: Angus Cockney

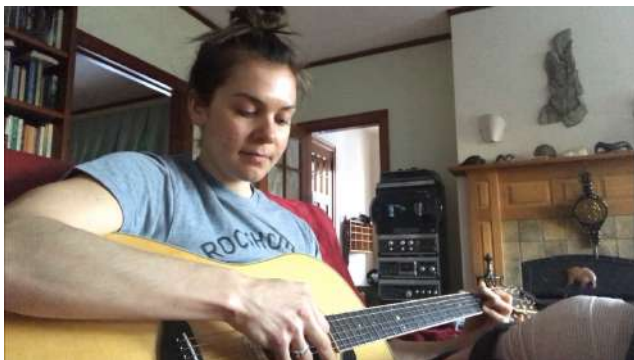


Leaving the Banff Mineral Springs hospital as the world closed its doors

Hack #2: YouTube Guitar lessons

I give my gratitude to Dr. Mark Heard and the dedicated, talented and kind staff of the Banff Sport Medicine Clinic and Banff Mineral Springs hospital. The medical team not only reassured me, they delivered renowned quality, timely and professional care with kindness and smiles. This was my first visit to the OR. I rolled out of the hospital the next day after an extremely painful night in hospital in a post-op drug daze with an ACL reconstruction from a contralateral hamstring autograft and a new-again MCL allograft reconstruction. I don't wish to post regular trip reviews of the OR, but my brief stint was enough to know that the standard of surgery and care of the Banff Sport Medicine Clinic and Banff Mineral Springs hospital is unparalleled. The doors to the hospital closed behind me as the medical staff prepared for the silent COVID storm that was fast approaching.

I hunkered down under the care of my parents and found solace in six strings. The first week post-op went something like this: ICE (constant), elevate, painkiller, drink, eat, sleep, ICE, play guitar, sleep, fresh air, painkiller, drink, eat, sleep. My poor mother. The pain I felt in my knee falls second to listening to me learn guitar on YouTube. I didn't necessarily feel like a rockstar at first, but was living the rockstar life at an altitude glacier camp - so much elevation and ice!



The worst sounds but the best therapy.



Ice, elevate, rest.

Hack #3: Physio

Physio isn't necessarily a hack, but treatment during a pandemic is. Thanks to physiotherapist Hugh Simson of OneWellness in Canmore, I received excellent treatment even when the world closed its doors. Hugh accompanied me throughout various injuries during my ski career and yet again demonstrated his kindness and generosity by going far beyond the scope of his responsibility. Beginning 2 weeks post-op, I started with Hugh to work on mobility and pain management.



Hugh helping me get my range of motion back!



Canoeing the North Sask with crew of friends helped to speed recovery ;)

Rehabbing a knee injury is painful and slow. My physio in the early phases (2-6 weeks post-op) consisted of ankle pumps and working on was sitting on the ground with a foam roller behind my knees, flexing my foot and pushing upwards to work on quad recruitment. I progressed from Iceman boyfriend 24/7 to **frozen green peas** strapped around a tensor bandage to hobble around the house and the Icemachine at night.

One exercise that worked really well during this time, was sitting on the ground with a foam roller behind my knees, flexing my foot and pushing upwards to work on quad recruitment. Ankle pumps, lots of icing (green peas and a tensor worked great) and rest. I slept with a cryocuff underneath my ROM brace until about 8 weeks post-op. 6 weeks after surgery, I was encouraged to push through pain and breakdown scar tissue. Working on extension and range of motion was incredibly painful but really necessary! I recommend headphones with some good music and distribute physio throughout the day. At this point, I was walking around without a cane, scraping my incision and surrounding area with the back of a butterknife and lotion to break up scar tissue and improve blood flow. Canoeing was the new activity to take me outside with a recovering knee!

Hack #4: Birding

It's safe to say that I'm not quite the same person without my usual physical outlets like running, skiing, biking and walking. I never pegged myself as the 'stop and observe' type, but bird watching proved to be the crucial outlet during my recovery to retain my mental and physical health. Between bouts of pain and discomfort, birding was a welcome therapy to distract my mind. Who knew kneehab would coincide with ornithology?!



Hand-peddalling with company for sanity!

It's June, 3 months post-op, and I'm stoked to report that I can hike with poles (and a new knee brace) and road bike! I am comfortably at 135 degrees and can straighten my leg. Physio these days involves speed squats with heels lifting off of ground, quad muscle recruitment, core stability and road biking. I'm reacquainting myself with sport and already dreaming of powder! As I gain mobility and the earth begins to resemble itself again, I want to say a heartfelt 'thank you', to the Banff Mineral Springs Hospital, Banff Sport Medicine, Trail Sports, One Wellness, the Rolfe/Webster family, the birds and my family and friends. See you on the trails!



Bird is the word.

Hack #5: Hand-pedal biking

I never realized how crucial movement was in everything from my thought processes and mood to my perspective and energy. Having a bike to move around with was absolutely game changing. I would've been a grumpy, anxious, nervous, awful and confused person had I not had this mobility. Ideally, biking is always with friends! That makes the aches and annoyances drift into the background. Now that I'm able to get around on a regular bike, I *almost* miss having this bike around.



First hike in months on Serrail Ridge in KCountry!