

# Gary's story

**“Me, My Clubfoot, and Sport.”**

# My diagnosis

- Clubfoot discovered at birth
- 4 surgeries by 6 years old
- Dillwyn Evan's procedure

I have never known any different, clubfoot was a condition which I was born with in my right foot.

My parents found out when I was born.

I had 4 corrective surgeries before I was 6, operated on by Leslie Klenerman and John Fixsen, both of whom are orthopaedic surgeons.

I am eternally grateful for what they did for me.

The final successful operation was called the Dillwyn Evans procedure which involved making an incision on the outside of the foot near the front of the ankle. A cut was made to separate the fused heel bone (calcaneus) and the next bone (cuboid) where a joint should have been. A bone graft was then used to maintain this space and keep length in the foot.



# My childhood

- **Never felt different**
- **Amazing family, and good care**
- **Love of sports**

I never felt any different to anyone else. I'm fortunate to have amazing parents and a family who found me the best possible NHS treatment in the country. They also didn't molly coddle me, or let me use my condition as an excuse not to take part. They threw me into everything.

I can remember going to school in these big brown boots that helped me walk properly, but for me that was just normal and was not a big deal. But, after the final surgery I could wear "cool trainers" all of a sudden. I felt sorry for my parents as they had to buy two pairs of shoes every time I got a new pair, because I had (and still have) odd sized feet!

With my newly corrected foot I embraced sports; I loved football (right footed), did lots of athletics, and was always riding my bike. I joined a running club and won the "Young Runner of the Year", and ran the mini-London Marathon. Following school I studied at Loughborough University, the biggest sports university in the UK.





# Busy living my life

As a kid after my surgeries I was pain-free and felt like I had a normal foot and leg.

As I got older it became more apparent I was different, because my right leg was, and still is, much skinnier than the left one. That always stuck in my mind and I am still conscious of it, but “it is what it is!” So, I always just got on with it.

Until I was 30 I did not let it stop me from doing anything and just treated my foot as normal. I even possibly overworked it if I’m honest. Just as a few examples; I ran 2 marathons, did many other running races (plus all the training etc.), regularly snowboarded, played football, went back-packing around the world, and did lots of business travel with work.

I have always been fiercely determined, I’m a terrible loser, and I think my foot has really molded who I am!

I refuse to accept not being able to do things that I want to do.





# My adult clubfoot experience

- Ski accident highlighted issues
- Told to stop impact sports



At 30, the pain in my foot became more intense and, following a snowboarding accident in Verbier (Switzerland), I was told I had severe arthritis in my foot and ankle. This had ultimately stemmed from having a club foot. My talus bone (the second biggest bone at the back of your foot) had collapsed, and there was barely any cartilage left in the joint space. This meant that the bones of my foot were no longer able to move together as they should.

I consulted a range of doctors and they told me to stop doing impact sports, this deeply affected me and I needed to find a way through this.

Sport and exercise have always been a big part of my life.

# Looking for a solution

- Tried many treatments
- Became painful to walk

So, I tried everything – physio, many PRP (Platlet-rich plasma therapy, using reintroduction your own blood cells to encourage healing) and steroid injections, orthotics, painkillers.

None of these were the solution for me.

It was becoming difficult to walk, and even got to a point where I considered ankle fusion surgery to take the pain away. But, ultimately I chose against this as a nonfunctional ankle joint was not an option, given that I had a young family at home.



I accepted the reality that I wouldn't be able to do the same level of impact sports that I used to, so I reset my goals just to be able to kick a football around with my kids when they grew older.



# What has worked for me in later life

## Cycling



From being told that regular movement and strengthening in the ankle joint could help, I decided to try cycling (a lot of it!).

Since starting riding regularly in 2018 my foot has gone from strength to strength and I have not looked back. Since then I've cycled 25,000km (basically the distance of London to China x 3 times) on my road bike and indoor garage trainer, averaging 4,200km per year. I have a competitive edge so I like to cycle in road races or ride events when I can. This keeps things interesting and gives me something to train for, and I use the Zwift cycling app when I'm cycling indoors on the static bike.

## A Fantastic consultant

In 2016 I was lucky enough to find and be advised by a fantastic Consultant Podiatric Surgeon: Nat Padhiar. We have remained in regular touch ever since, and Nat's professional opinion, guidance and support has been immensely helpful in allowing me to consider my options, in an informed and trusted manner.



# My life now



- Exercise works for me
- Now largely painfree
- Happy family life
- Career success

What worked for me was getting back to exercise, specifically cycling; it is no pain, no gain for me (usually 5 days a week). The more cycling I do the better my foot feels. I still have good days and bad days, but back in 2017 I could barely walk without being in complete agony. I am now largely pain free and do not take any medication to manage my condition.

I am happily married and very proud of my 2 young boys, and yes, I do now play football with them every week in the garden or park! So, I have achieved the goal I set myself when things were looking bleak. We are a big sports family, devoted Arsenal fans, and also enjoy watching Formula 1 racing.



Having a club foot and the added determination it has given me has also had huge positive impacts in my career. I've used this resilience and determination to build a successful career in Sales and Professional Services for over 20 years. I would not have achieved what I have done within my career without having this added determination and “fire in my belly” which stems from my foot and the challenges that I have faced around it.



# GARY'S top tips

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Gary says:  
Don't give up!

## 1. Set goals

For me it was about finding a way to improve the function of my foot enough to ensure that I could play football with my boys, and nothing was going to stop me doing that.

## 2. Start gently

When you find something that seems to be working or improving things, progress gently and slowly build up from there.

## 4. Mental attitude is key

Don't give up! You have to want to improve and be prepared to put the work in.

## 6. Find your pain threshold

Identify what you can take versus what you can't.

## 3. Accept good days and bad days

I have come to realise now that it will never be perfect, but it's more than good enough for my lifestyle. Learning to accept this, and embracing it, has been life changing.

## 5. Embrace the challenges

Use the frustrations, which come from the condition, to drive you.

## 7. Talk about it

Get the help and guidance you need, and explore different options.

# How Steps helps



There is no right answer to managing club foot, and it is about exploring different options and finding what works for you.

The best advice I received is to **“manage the patient, not the condition”**, as everyone can be different.

For example, regular physio did not work for me, but many others have had excellent results.

If I had not explored different options and found cycling, and the benefits it has given me, I would probably have had the fusion surgery and would now be much more limited in my mobility.

Steps, and other like-minded charities, can help to provide ideas and options to explore to find what works best for you.



steps

We don't take walking for granted

Visit [www.stepsworldwide.org](http://www.stepsworldwide.org) for more information on Clubfoot and how Steps can help

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