

Phil Newton talks to 2019 British Open O70 champion Howard Cherlin on how a new knee reinvigorated his career and led to new titles



CHERLIN'S NEW KNEE

When hip and knee replacements came into mainstream orthopaedics in the 1970s, a successful outcome was pain-free walking. Since then, hardware improvements and better surgical techniques, coupled with a more active group of patients, have raised the expectations of some new joint recipients.

However, the standard advice about resuming sport has remained pretty conservative. Some surgeons actively discourage any sport and most only agree to low-impact activities. Cycling, swimming and golf get the thumbs up, but running and squash are actively discouraged. The fear is that exposing the new joint to high levels of load could cause premature wear or loosen the bone attachment, resulting in pain, disability and revision surgery. This is difficult and can give poor outcomes. These fears aren't based on a significant amount of scientific evidence, for the simple reason that there isn't enough data relating to people who have resumed high-demand sports after joint replacement.

One person in the squash community who has resumed playing after such an operation is Howard Cherlin. Howard had a total knee replacement five years ago and has returned to competitive squash in his local county leagues, nationally and internationally. Howard's return to squash has been so successful that he is the current over-70 British National and Open champion, and the European O70 champion. Some may view Howard's decision to disregard medical advice to be reckless. However, I take the view that as long as the potential pitfalls have been explained, then his decision to get back on court should be respected.



Howard Cherlin proudly shows off his left knee following his knee replacement operation

I am fascinated by individuals like Howard, who fly in the face of perceived wisdom and are able to perform at the highest level of their sport. I recently caught up with him and I started by asking what led to his knee replacement. "I was told that the pain and swelling in the back of my knee was due to a Baker's cyst, and that this could have been a consequence of knee surgery 25 years ago," he replied. "Despite this, I was able to play competitive squash locally and to a national age-group level, but the pain and swelling were getting worse.

"About seven years ago I was offered a new knee, which I turned down. However, things steadily deteriorated. The pain became much worse and my knee was more bowed, so I decided to have the replacement surgery."

I was interested to know if Howard had discussed his sporting intentions with his knee surgeon. "He knew I was a squash player, but I don't think he fully understood the level to which I was playing," Howard replied. "My GP advised me to stop playing squash after the operation, as it could prematurely wear out the new joint. My reply was that there would be new technology around by then!"

It is clear that Howard had a definite plan to get back to playing squash and I was interested to find out what type of rehab he followed. "The exercises that the physios gave me were very tedious and boring! Pretty much from my first day home, I decided that I would keep as active as I could," he recalled. "I live in a five-storey property and I got up and down all of the stairs at least a couple of times every day. By eight weeks after the op, my knee felt strong and I could play 18 holes of golf. By five months, I was back on court and a couple of months after that I started playing competitively, and have never looked back."

Five years after his left knee replacement, Howard is delighted with the result. "I've rarely had a twinge of pain and my movement on court is the best it's been for years," he said.

So, what are the key factors in Howard's successful return to competitive squash? First on my list would be Howard's positive and focused mindset. The second is his rehab schedule, which cleverly utilised his five-storey house! All of that stair climbing seems to have helped Howard regain knee strength and control, which is crucial to getting back to high-demand sports like squash safely and effectively.

Individuals like Howard who go against the perceived wisdom of the day and show what can be achieved are a valuable resource. They can inspire others and their experiences and sporting achievements make the medical minds of the day re-evaluate what is deemed possible.