



“I just wanted to get back on the job!”

Interstate truck driver and former farmer Neil Burbidge is a man who likes to keep busy.

After 40 years of working hard, he wasn't about to let a knee injury slow him down for long. He worked hard to get moving again, and is now happy to be back on the job.

It was dead calm the day Neil was injured at the wool store in Port Adelaide. He was unhooking the ratchet straps over the wool bales on the back of his truck when he heard a bale dislodge above him. He threw himself aside, but not far enough – the bale landed on his leg and ankle, all 200 kilograms of it.

“I couldn't get it off,” says Neil. “I was lying out in the sun, and there was no-one around. There was no reason for it to fall, there was no wind. But it did.” Luckily, after some time another truck came into the yard, and the driver saw Neil's plight and rolled the bale off him. But the damage was done.

When Neil stood up, thinking he was okay, his knee collapsed. An ambulance was called, and he was taken to Wakefield Hospital. Neil was examined and sent home, but ended up back at Wakefield a week later. He sings the praises of Dr Ben Allen.

“He was great – he really talked to me in a language I could understand.”

Neil had his knee cleaned out and the ligament stapled, then was put on a machine to keep the knee moving. “I stayed on it most of the 24 hours I was in hospital for. It was painful, but I was determined to keep going.”

Despite this, his knee soon seized up again and Neil had to have it cleaned up again. This time, they put a steroid in the knee to stop the build up of scar tissue.

Neil then set his alarm every night at regular intervals to exercise, stretch and massage the knee. “I just thought, you're never going to get better while you're sitting in your lounge chair doing nothing.”

Neil was given a modified exercise bike purchased by WorkCover so that he could continue to strengthen his knee.

However, it was on his birthday with his grandkids over that more trouble set in. “I felt as crook as a dog,” says Neil. “There was a red mark on my knee and my wife, who's a nurse, said ‘I reckon it's infected’. She insisted we go to the doctor in Murray Bridge.”

It was lucky they caught it early – Neil had a staphylococcus infection. He was placed on intravenous antibiotics. “They put a tube through my armpit and into my heart!”

The infection set back his healing at least a couple of months.

“Then the doctor told me to start working and walking around the farm.” He started with just five minutes a day, “pottering around”.

Neil was a self-employed farmer for 40 years, before he became a truckdriver, and he also owned some Wendy’s stores in the region. “I’ve always worked,” he says. “I’m not used to sitting around – I’m used to being flat out!”

Neil applied this work ethic to his healing. “Once I could walk enough, we started physio twice a week. It hurt like hell. But the exercise and massage helped, despite the pain. Eventually we went into the gym there. At a certain point, it felt like the physio stopped working, so I started going to the gym instead.”

His case manager Rachel (“who was really understanding”) spoke to him about work hardening. “My mate had an earth moving company, so I helped him – just doing bits and pieces to start.”

Then Neil went back to the trucking company he worked for, and did ‘light duties’ in the workshop. “I just wanted to get back on the job. I figured, if I just stayed in my comfort zone, I’d still be on WorkCover. My rehabilitation specialist would advise me to do something, and I’d say ‘I’ve already done it!’ If they told me to do 20 reps at the gym, I’d do 30.”

“I’ll always have to be careful – the knee’ll never come good again, and arthritis might set in. A knee reconstruction will be necessary in 10 years. But I still go to the gym to build up the muscles around the knee to compensate for tears in the ACL.”

But the bottom line for Neil was, to get back to the work he really wanted to do, he had to get back into the truck. And he did – just over a year after the accident.

“My advice to anyone else in this situation would be to just get out there, despite the pain. Push yourself further than they expect you to. And ask a lot of questions – of your specialists, and about WorkCover. The problem is, you don’t know what questions to ask when you first go on WorkCover, so you just have to communicate a lot – about workers comp, and also about your job. So when they do work assessments for you to help you get back to work, they know as much about your particular situation as they can.”