

Second toe syndrome

Catherine Morrison

Leo's story (now 16 years old)

At first, they made me play Saturday soccer. Before every game, Mum would tell me, when the ball came towards me, not to run away. 'Run *to* the ball, Leo, not *away* from it,' she'd say. I'd go out on the field and be OK at the start of the game, but then the ball would come straight at me: 'What do I do again?'

I'd get distracted easily. I'd forget about the game. The field was so green and muddy. I used to wish I had my digger there. I would build a huge trench around the outside of the field to drain the water. I'd roll the field flat. The landfill would be used to build a viewing platform for the spectators. I'd need scaffolding for that. And ... then Mum's voice would interrupt. '*Leo!!* The ball!!! Run *TO* the ball!!' My plans would be blasted to smithereens. The ball would go belting past me. Everyone would groan.

Halfway through that season, Dad said to Mum that I should have played rugby right from the start. 'Soccer's a waste of time – it's a girls' game anyway,' I heard him say.

The next year, Dad signed me up for rugby. Dad said I'd like it. I wasn't so sure. I've never been good at that catching and throwing stuff. Mum said I'm like that because of something that sounds like a *really* flash vegetable. It's called 'Dyspraxia'. My brothers don't have it. Mum said you can call people lots of names. She said I also have the name 'Expert Scaffolder and Digger'. My brothers haven't got that either. I am not sure which one I caught first.

I hated rugby after a while, but I couldn't tell Dad that. Everyone yelled heaps more at rugby. 'Tackle, tackle!' 'You're playing like a pack of pansies.' 'Ruck the ball.' 'Rip the ball.' 'Stop playing like a girl's blouse.' 'Get *in* there.' 'You're like flies 'round dog shit.'

After a few games, no one yelled to pass the ball to me. That was good. I always hated it when the ball came my way, anyway. *Pass the ball? Set it up? Run with it? Lay it out?* Far too confusing. I liked talking to the players from the other team though – Dad said, don't do that. My rugby socks never stayed up and I had to keep pulling them up over and over – Mum said don't do that, either.

Second toe syndrome 91

I got a cake when I scored my first try. I actually just happened to be there and I fell on the ball. Everyone was really pleased. Dad looked chuffed. I only ever got one cake, though. My youngest brother, Fergus, he got lots of cakes.

Mum didn't think rugby was working for me – I heard her say it to Dad. Dad didn't want to talk about me and rugby any more. Sometimes I'd look at my short second toe and wish it would grow longer like Mum's and Dad's and my stupid brothers'. Maybe that would've helped.

One day, Mum and Dad said maybe we would try something different. Something less confusing, they said. But I had to play some kind of team sport on a Saturday. Everyone in our family did. Diggers didn't count.

I joined Cadets. It was my idea. Mum and Dad didn't know anything about Cadets. Mum said I could give it a go. Dad said it wasn't really a sport. I guess war isn't really. It's about parades, marching and uniforms immaculately pressed with no 'train lines' visible. We travel in Unimogs, do rifle shooting and stuff like that. John, my younger brother, his long second toe stuffed into his flash new rugby boots, clattering down the driveway, would give me a flick as he ran past on his way to the car. 'Retard,' he'd hiss. He said I looked like one in the uniform. I didn't say anything back.

There's no parents' shouting on the sidelines at Cadets. The Sergeant Major is who I listen to, and she tells us exactly what to do. I like that. I like her.

When we collected for ANZAC day – that's the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps – bigger boys pushed and shoved me on the street. Someone even fired BB bullets at us when we were standing on the corner. I didn't care.

An old man bought a poppy and told me how he lost his best mate in the trenches at Gallipoli. He bought two for \$10. He was taking a poppy to put on his friend's headstone at the cemetery. I heard a lot of stories that day. I'm proud to be in the Cadets. Short second toe 'n' all.

Leo's Mum's story

We were a sporty family. Dad, a former provincial rep, was proud of us.

'It's all about the second toe,' Dad said. He knew exactly how to tell who would be a fast runner, who would succeed, and who wouldn't. 'Your second toe has to be longer than your big toe,' he said, showing us his to prove his point. After every bath time, we'd check. Thankfully, just like Dad, we all had a second toe longer than the rest. We were sure then, we were destined to be fast, to be first, to be the best.

Practice was in the front paddock every night. The lawn-mower was heaved over the barbed wire fence. The sheep scattered with the inevitable roar, and the running lanes magically appeared.

Dad coached us to be great starters. He had his very own set of starter clappers, fashioned from two bits of four-by-two.

'I'm going to change the pace of the "ready, set and go" each time. Those buggers in town never start a race properly,' he muttered. 'So, be on your toes.'

92 *Catherine Morrison*

I was, in fact, a fabulous starter, but then would have to zigzag my way to avoid the sheep droppings. Meanwhile, my brother, Joseph, a slower starter, never minded the green squish and splurge between his toes. He would run the straight line to win. Dad said the scotch thistles peppering the paddock were the best thing out for us. They spurred us over the finish line. 'Makes you tough,' he reminded us as the thistles needled our bare feet.

At the town champs, I knew I could win. I always did. At the finish line, proud as punch, I'd pull off my socks and shoes. My second toe winked at me. Dad was always right: my second toe was my secret weapon.

Leo's Dad's story

Winter rugby practice was in the back paddock. I'd get Dad's rugby boots out of the storeroom. They had leather studs, were a million years old and way too big. Even with my elongated toes, the bootlaces had to be pulled so tight to stop them falling off my feet. I played a special game of rugby. I called it One Man Rugby. I'd pretend to be Barry John, the famous Welsh fly-half. I'd sometimes pretend to be Bryan Williams, the All Blacks winger. I'd spend hours scoring tries all over the field. I was always on the winning side, no matter what.

Mum and Dad would take me into town for the games. That's what you did on a Saturday. We played all over the province. We were a *real* team. Tough. Confident. Tactical. We'd thrash the townies, easily beat the boarders and, when we took on the Dooleys, we had them quaking in their boots before the whistle even blew. After the game, we'd show each other our battle wounds. The more ruck marks you had, the tougher you were. In those days, only sooks wore helmets. Only sissies wore singlets under their rugby jerseys.

When I got picked for a rep team, it was another step closer to wearing the famous All Blacks jersey; in front of the screaming crowds; inside the stadium at Twickenham; my hand on my heart; Dame Kiri Te Kanawa singing the New Zealand national anthem; the team performing the haka ... ; I imagined being the great All Blacks lock, Colin Meads. I always wondered if Colin's second toe was longer than his big toe, just like mine. Dad said it would be.

But ... enough of that stuff.

It's not just about getting out there on the field. It is about *how* you play the game when you get there that is important. Ready for action. Skilled. Strong. Focused. Aggressive. Man to man. You look them in the eye at the start of the game. You stare them out. Only then is the game *really* on. 'Read my lips,' you say slowly as you bring out ... the deadly double-barrel-shooter sign! 'Bite the dust. 'cause you guys are going down ... down ... down!'

You know what? I think I'm going to keep my boots for a million years too.

Leo again

Mmm ... don't think I'll keep my rugby boots. When I'm a Dad though, I'll probably still inspect my children's feet. You never know what you're going to get, I guess. But I'll probably be pleased if their second toe is longer than the first.

It's a family tradition.

Research context

Poststructural theoretical resources inform this narrative. How does one experience physicality when one is 'less able' to engage in traditional sporting activities valued within the family? It would seem imperative to understand the experiences of those whose habits, dispositions and physicalities differ from the 'norm'. By interviewing Dad, Leo and then the writer (Mum), reflecting through writing this narrative, we question how one young man with a dyspraxia label negotiates and understands his physicality and sense of 'self' in a family where physical competence and masculinity are inevitably linked. The narrative enables us to interrogate the discourses around physical culture: whose interests are privileged (or not) in what sports, and which physical activities count?

Recommended reading

- Connors, C. and Stalker, K. (2007) 'Children's experiences of disability: Pointers to a social model of childhood disability', *Disability and Society*, 22(1): 19–33.
- Fitzgerald, H. and Kirk, D. (2009) 'Identity work: Young disabled people, family and sport', *Leisure Studies*, 28(4): 469–88.
- Martino, W. and Pallotta-Chiarolli, M. (2003) *So What's a Boy? Addressing Issues of Masculinity and Schooling*, Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Morrison, C. (2009) 'Deconstructing a narrative of physical culture', in H. Fitzgerald (ed.) *Disability and Youth Sport*, London: Routledge, pp. 132–44.
- Pringle, R. and Markula, P. (2005) 'No pain is sane after all: A Foucauldian analysis of masculinities and men's experiences in Rugby', *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 22(4): 472–97.

