

HEALTH & WELLNESS

WHAT’S YOUR WORKOUT?

How Shark-Attack Survivor Got Fitter

By SANETTE TANAKA

Twenty-four hours after his right leg was amputated, Paul de Gelder went back to exercising.

“The doctor came in and found me doing one-armed chin-ups on the bar in my bed. He was not very happy about it,” Mr. de Gelder says.

Three years ago, Mr. de Gelder, a diver in the Australian navy who lives in Sydney, was testing detection devices for a counterterrorism exercise in Sydney Harbor when a shark seized hold of his right leg.

“It started shaking me, took me underwater,” he says. He tried to fight the shark off, even delivered a few punches, but even Mr. de Gelder’s military training wasn’t a match for the shark. After a few seconds, the shark let go and disappeared, allowing Mr. de Gelder to swim to a nearby safety boat.

When he was pulled out of the water, his shipmates saw significant damage. The shark had torn his hamstring and the back of his thigh. His right arm was gone up to the elbow. After a week in the hospital, he made the decision to have his right leg amputated.

While in the hospital, Mr. de Gelder resolved to be as fit and active as ever. During his nine-week stay, family and friends brought weights and tension bands so he could train from bed. Eventually, he was outfitted with prosthetic limbs specially designed for active lifestyles—an X2 leg that cost \$150,000 and an I-LIMB Hand that cost \$60,000.

“Without fitness in my life, it really doesn’t seem to be much of a life,” says Mr. de Gelder, now 35. “Instead of getting back to where I was, I thought, ‘Why don’t I be better than what I was?’”

Last month, Mr. de Gelder transferred from full-time service as a dive instructor to a reserve status so he could promote his book, “No Time for Fear,” and deliver motivational speeches.

The Workout

Mr. de Gelder wakes up at 5 a.m. every day. Three to four times a week, he walks on the beach for about five kilometers, or just over three miles. The 45-minute walk is a full workout on its own, he says, since it requires about 80% more energy to walk with a prosthetic leg than with two legs. “Going for a nice



Paul de Gelder, above, lost his lower leg and forearm as a result of a 2009 shark attack. His fitness regimen includes a gym workout, below, six days a week. ‘Instead of getting back to where I was, I thought, “Why don’t I be better than what I was?”’



long walk is perfect because I can’t do all that cardio exercise,” he says.

If he’s not walking in the morning, or when he has a break in his schedule, Mr. de Gelder goes to the gym. Finding a comfortable regimen re-

quired “a lot of trial and error,” he says. The prosthetic leg throws off his balance, and it prevents him from doing certain standing exercises, such as lunges and squats. To warm up, Mr. de Gelder does 10 minutes on the elliptical machine, then lifts weights for about an hour, doing four to five sets of eight to 12 repetitions for each exercise. He focuses on one body part for each day of the week—legs, shoulders, back, chest, biceps and triceps—with one day off. Mr. de Gelder also practices Pilates-type exercises, what he calls his go-to core workout, for 20 minutes two to three times a week.

The Diet

“I don’t like any vegetables, and I’m not a fan of fruit,” Mr. de Gelder says. To compensate, he makes a mean smoothie in the morning that combines everything from strawberries to egg whites to protein powder. “It’s the best way to start the day.” For lunch, he receives ready-made meals from a food-delivery service or stops by a local Thai restaurant that serves “healthy, good-for-you take-out.” For dinner, Mr. de Gelder eats lots of meat, including chicken, beef and kangaroo, with a salad thrown in. Eating five to six meals a day, Mr. de Gelder says he doesn’t deprive himself. “I eat when I’m hungry, and I’m always hungry.”

Although Mr. de Gelder has a soft spot for ice cream, he tries not to overindulge. Sometimes, though, it is just too tempting. “After my last trip to Italy to see my girlfriend, I was feeling a little down. I had a box of Magnum [ice cream bars] in the fridge and thought, ‘I’ll just have one.’ And then I had another. I was three deep, so I just ate the whole box.”

The Gear

Mr. de Gelder has six pairs of Nike Free Run running shoes (about \$165 a pair), because they are flexible and light. “Good for a prosthetic foot,” he says. Other costs are relatively low—a gym membership that runs about \$57 a month and “whatever’s comfortable” in the way of clothing.

Moving Forward

Rehabilitation has been a continuing, painful process. “Even now, my body is still adapting, but with patience and perseverance, it keeps getting better and better,” he says.

Mr. de Gelder’s activities have been mostly land-based, but eventually he would like to get back into the water. “I miss the things I love doing, diving and swimming and surfing,” he says. “I was an extremely high-functioning person, and I just want to remain that way.”



Mr. de Gelder walks the beach for 45 minutes three or four times a week.

Prosthetic Leg For Athletes: No Need to Think

Paul de Gelder’s prosthetic leg, the X2 by Otto Bock Health Care, was engineered for someone with an active lifestyle. Peter Nohre, the company’s director of marketing for technical orthopedics and mobility solutions, explains the device’s design.

How does it work?

The X2 has a central microprocessor that takes the “thinking” out of walking, Mr. Nohre said. Six sensors detect slight changes in movement, like a tilt in the knee or an added weight, and the microprocessor responds with adjustments to the leg. For example, if the wearer begins to walk faster, “the X2 will add more resistance to the knee so the leg doesn’t slip out in front of him,” Mr. Nohre said.

What kinds of activities can people with the X2 do?

In theory, X2 users can do most of the activities that people with two legs can, Mr. Nohre said. They can walk backwards, play basketball or tennis or work out on the Stairmaster. Nohre said the only limitation is lifting weights because the X2 has a weight capacity of 330 pounds including the weight of the wearer.

What’s next?

The X2 is a precursor to the X3, slated for release in early 2013. Unlike the X2, the X3 is waterproof, Mr. Nohre said.

—Sanette Tanaka

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