

Need New Knees?

Part 2



Pain is temporary. It may last a minute, or an hour, or a day, or a year, but eventually it will subside and something else will take its place. If I quit, however, it lasts forever.

Lance Armstrong



One Handler's Experience with a Total Knee Replacement

By Steve Soberski

Surgery was scheduled for October 17. On October 16, I drove to Omaha for Yukon's last class with our Go Dogs friends for a while. I have tried to keep up a normal agility training schedule right up to the day of surgery.

After a restless night my wife and I were up early. I had to be at the hospital at 5:30 a.m. Surgery was scheduled for 7:30 a.m.

Day 1

The surgery went well. I woke up in the early afternoon feeling hungry. I couldn't move my right leg and didn't feel any pain. So far, so good. Later that evening the femoral nerve block I received before surgery wore off; I was in real pain and using the morphine-drip button.

Day 2

Up early, no lounging around. I was up and having my first physical therapy (PT) session in my hospital room. In the afternoon, using my crutches, I walked by myself to the PT room where we had a group session. This was my first experience with the "chair of pain." Each session ended with the physical therapist working one-on-one to measure the range of motion (ROM) you have with your new knee. ROM was everything. You sit in a chair and with the help of your physical therapist you flex your knee way beyond what you think would be possible or humane. These sessions continue after you leave the hospital.

Day 4

I was discharged from the hospital. I arrived home and after my wife helped me get safely situated in a chair, she let the dogs in and I was greeted by Woola and Yukon. It was a wild greeting and I was glad to be sitting down, protecting my knee. Yukon did his best to curl up next to me on the couch and I was touched by his concern—good to be home.

Day 6

It was interesting how I started measuring progress in very small steps. This morning for the first time since my surgery I could lift my right leg without any help. I'm talking just being able to lift it a few inches. Running on an agility course seemed light years away.

Day 8

One week after surgery and at my first PT appointment outside of the hospital, we set up a series of exercises. My therapist said the real work in the rehab process must be done at home; the office visits were opportunities to evaluate my progress and to add new exercises and



increase the intensity level of different exercises.

I also had my first training session with the Poodles. I had worked on some exercises before surgery with them and now it was time to give it a try. I pulled a stool out to my driveway and while sitting down, worked on a few simple exercises. Just some *Watch* and targeting exercises, but a start. We were actually training; the dogs were excited; I was excited!

Days 9-14

I told my physical therapist my goal was to train my dogs and to compete in agility again. I picked my therapist because she understood my goals and was willing to work with me to reach them. At the time I didn't have resources that are now available through the Agility Knees Yahoo discussion group, including a video clip of an agility run put together so that a doctor or physical therapist can see what we do when we run agility.



I was getting into a routine with my rehab: up early, exercise session, then another exercise session at noon or a PT session. I continued to work with my dogs

on *Watch*, targeting, and *Go Out* exercises sitting on a stool in my yard. I also tried *Behind*, *Side*, and *Through* exercises on crutches. I had practiced the exercises using crutches before the surgery so my dogs did not have any issues with them. Amazingly I didn't trip or get knocked down.

Day 15

I returned to my orthopedic surgeon for a two-week check up. The staples are removed from my incision; my doctor is pleased with how well I'm doing. I walked around the block for the first time with crutches.

Day 18

Today I tugged a little with Yukon for the first time—a big step from just sitting and doing some exercises with the dogs in my driveway. I could interact with the dogs.



Day 21

Improvements at three weeks:

- Could walk two blocks with crutches
- Could walk easily with one crutch
- Could walk short distances without any help
- No pain while standing up; could walk without pain
- Exercise load increasing and reached 110° of flexion
- Started swimming and used a pull buoy because I still can't kick.
- Most importantly, could work with my dogs

I could now do things with my dogs without using crutches; I could tug with them in my yard. I could use my contact trainer and work on nose touches.

What Are PT Sessions About?

Before you have your TKR you are repeatedly bombarded with the fact that the success of the TKR depends on physical therapy (PT) and how well you adhere to the program you set up with your physical therapist.

PT starts the day after surgery in the hospital. I started office visits one week after surgery and followed basically the same routine I was put through in the hospital including:

- **Quad sets:** With your legs out straight, you contract your quadriceps muscles and hold for a count of 5 (2 sets of 10 repetitions). All exercises eventually worked up to 3 sets of 10 repetitions.
- **Leg raises:** While lying supine, you raise your leg off the ground. Hold and release (2 sets of 10 repetitions). Also do this while lying on your side. Also move your leg from side to side in a horizontal plane.
- **Hamstring stretches using a towel:** From a sitting position with a towel around your instep, extend your leg. The object is to get your leg in a straightened position.

As I progressed, my therapist added more exercises. I started using a NU Step Machine (www.nustep.com). I sat upright in a chair with platforms for my feet and pushed with my feet; it was similar to a stair-step machine.

Next I added work on a treadmill, then an elliptical trainer, with the goal of riding an Exercycle. I also started light weight training at this time, concentrating on upper body exercises.

Each PT session ended with the chair of pain. I dreaded this exercise: I sat in a chair, started moving my leg to loosen and warm it up, and then started bending and flexing it. My physical therapist took range of motion (ROM) measurements: the goal was to get to 120° of flexion in my leg. After my leg was warmed up, she planted my foot in position. Then it was up to me to slide forward in the chair while she measured the degree of flexion. How much pain I wanted to subject myself to was in my hands but the encouragement was always, "You can do better; you're at 104°; you can do more." So I started to embrace the pain and the numbers the therapist was reading from her Goniometer (a plastic measuring device). If you reached 104° at your last session you wanted to leave with 106° at the next session. The pain was worth each small incremental improvement.

Next we incorporated wall slides for increasing ROM. Lying on your back near a wall, you put your feet on the wall and slide your foot down the wall so that you can control how much flexion you can tolerate.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF STEVE SOBENSKY



PHOTO BY DOUG SMITH

Days 27-40

Progression was slow but steady. I walked the dogs in the morning; slowly, but I walked with them. I could drive to two different locations to train where I was able to work on contact equipment and short sequences where I didn't have to move much. We also worked on connection exercises; we played; we tugged. In these sessions I wanted the dogs to play with me and I wanted to assess how well I could move. It was obvious I couldn't get out and run an agility course but, at least I could visualize that happening soon. Couldn't do that a few weeks ago.

I reached a milestone on day 39; at my PT appointment I reached 120° of flexion. That's what I've been working on for the last five-plus weeks.

On day 40 I was able to do 2 minutes on the upright cycle; not much but I knew I could build on this.

Day 48

I drove to Omaha to attend Yukon's last Handler 1 class. We attended the first class of this session the day before my surgery and I wanted to attend and participate in the last class of this session. I could participate in some exercises. I took it easy but I was out on the floor running. Well, okay, I was moving, but playing agility with my dog.

Progress through the Holidays

By now I could get into somewhat of a normal routine with my work, PT, and training the dogs. I started exercising the dogs more on walks both around my home and in a park that offered a mix of different surfaces and terrain. There's nothing like walking up and down hills for exercise, for both the Poodles and me.

I started taking obedience lessons with the dogs and continued working on foundation agility exercises. Woola, my older Poodle, who was never exposed to targeting and other foundation drills, benefited from going back to basics. She has become good at targeting, which should help us with contacts, something I never trained properly with her.



PHOTO BY DOUG SMITH

With my younger Poodle, Yukon, I trained flat work away from agility equipment. We worked on *Go Out or Go Ahead* exercises. We started to do different running and switching exercises with changes in direction, around or through my legs, and then a switch and a throw of the tug toy to get him to really move ahead of me. I could now send him over a series of jumps to a tunnel without babysitting him. He must become good at distance work because even with the new knee I won't impress anybody with my sprinting speed on course.

January 2006: The New Year

It's been about three months since surgery. I drove to Omaha for the first 2006 agility class at Go Dogs for my younger Poodle. I was also helping to teach a Beginning agility class afterward.

The first class went well and I could fully participate. Once I started working I didn't even think about my knee. I was unsure how I was doing for speed or mobility on the course but I felt good. I couldn't do this last summer and couldn't participate in classes or think about entering an agility trial.

My concern about changing direction and doing a front cross on course was not a

problem. I made sure I wore shoes that wouldn't catch on the rubber surface of the training building. And for training on grass or dirt, I didn't want to wear shoes with an aggressive tread pattern and nothing with cleats. I didn't want my foot to catch on something to cause me to twist or to fall.

I had finally reached the point where I was happy that I had the TKR and felt that my primary goal, being able to train and compete in agility with my dogs, had been achieved. I'm never going to be able to run like I did when I was 25 but we all are faced with that. I can now train without pain and have high hopes that I'll be able to compete and enjoy my dogs for many years to come.

My First Agility Trial Since Surgery

So, it's time to see how well everything came together. I've had the surgery; I went through weeks of PT; worked hard to get ROM and to build up strength in my leg; started agility training; started attending agility classes; and now I've entered an agility trial.

Final Notes

The decision to have a TKR was very difficult. With any surgery there are risks, and even more so with major surgery that replaces your knee with an artificial implant. I put off making this decision until it was made for me. I had reached a point where I couldn't participate in the sport I love and where I couldn't train my dogs or take them for walks. I was prevented from doing the things in life that I found worthwhile.

Almost all those I have talked to who have had a TKR comment on how it has allowed them to return to doing the things in life that they find important. Many people wondered why they waited so long and were considering having their other knee replaced. I think I waited until the perfect time to have my surgery. I needed to reach the point where I couldn't do anything—couldn't train, couldn't compete, couldn't do some of the most basic things in life. I needed that push to make the decision. And I can honestly say it was the right decision for me. 🐾

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