

SHARK BAIT

Within three months of fracturing his forearm, Sale Sharks wing Oriol Ripol is back on scoring form. *Matthew Davis*, discovers this is largely thanks to the work of renowned shoulder surgeon Len Funk who was able to operate on Oriol within hours of his injury and limit damage to the arm

It was in the dying minutes of the EDF Energy Cup match against the Cardiff Blues in October that the 33-year-old Spanish winger sustained the double fracture. Luckily South African born Len, a consultant at the BMI Alexandra Hospital, Cheadle was in the crowd at Edgeley Park with his anaesthetist and was called to the home changing room to assess the damage.

Oriol was in theatre by that evening and after a day in hospital was on the road to recovery – culminating in his scoring return to the side against Clermont in the Heineken Cup in January.

“It was very lucky that the surgeon and the anaesthetist were in the crowd – it worked out really well,” said Oriol. “It was great because with a break like that I needed to have the surgery done as quickly as possible and it could not have been any earlier, I was in surgery that evening.

“My rehabilitation finished a couple of months ago and now I am back playing and feel very good. No one likes to be injured and I just wanted to bounce back as soon as possible. It was important not to rush the recovery but the care I got from Len and staff at the Alexandra was phenomenal.

Len did a great job and the scar is tiny, I am so happy with it.”

Oriol was experiencing first hand the important relationship between Sale Sharks and BMI who offer on-the-ground support to all team members throughout the rugby season. Players are given support in the event of any injuries suffered during matches or training

as well as diagnosis and treatment at BMI The Alexandra Hospital.

Consultant shoulder and elbow surgeon, Len, routinely works with elite and professional athletes, with a particular interest in rugby and contact sports. With a wealth of experience treating professional sports people, the 44-year-old knows the importance of getting players back to fitness quickly and believes the team receive unique and first class treatment.

“For emergency type of work to get patients in that quickly is not a service you get at any other hospital – we help to keep the Sale Shark’s tackling,” smiles Len. “We got Oriol into the Alexandra on the evening of the match for an X-ray and then straight into theatre.

“It is imperative for the players that they get back playing. By not playing they are losing money – it is their job and there are no off-seasons in sport anymore.

“It is crucial for professional players that they have got a great medical team behind them. It is a important thing to have because there are more injuries nowadays as the game has got harder and tougher.

“The dedication and commitment of the support team allows us to continue training and competing at the highest level, with the confidence that we have the best medical assistance available to us should we need it.”

Another player to benefit is Samoan centre Anitelea “Andy” Tuilagi. Len operated on the 22-year-old after he dislocated his shoulder in Shark’s away defeat to Munster in the Heineken Cup in January.

The six foot, 96kg centre required reconstructive surgery on his left shoulder and also surgery on an old AC joint injury on his right shoulder. Andy who is recovering well from the operation is targeting a return in the next couple of months and a push for end of season glory with the Shark’s in the Guinness Premiership.

“It was a horrible injury; I have never felt pain like that before,” says Andy. “I was told that Len was one of the best surgeon’s around as he had worked on lots of Shark’s players before, everyone recommended him to me.

“The injury happened in Ireland on the Friday and by Monday I was at the BMI and had the operation the same week. When Len saw me he decided to operate on both shoulders. I was in hospital for about five days and everyone there was great, they made me feel really calm, I felt like I was in safe hands and I was very impressed.

“I have now got full range of movement in my shoulders and I am working hard with the physiotherapists at Sale and training non-stop - I think I have ten more weeks to go before I am back playing.

“I am looking forward to getting back out on the pitch and hopefully helping Shark’s reach the play-offs and the final of the Premiership.”

Len’s job doesn’t finish when the player’s leave the theatre as the hospital works closely with the physiotherapist and doctors at the club. “My aim is to fix things rigidly and solidly then the players can begin the process

of sport’s specific rehabilitation.

“We work with the physios and rehabilitation team at the club. Post-treatment, the input from professional athletes is very high in terms of their rehabilitation. You can push them faster and harder than a normal person.”

Mark Almond, executive director of BMI The Alexandra Hospital, said the partnership will enable his consultants to develop research on the type of injuries that rugby players incur. “This may lead to improvements in training methods and tactics which may help to prevent these injuries occurring during their careers.”

For Len, the greatest thrill is seeing players like Oriol and Andy getting back on the pitch and playing rugby.

“They are my babies – that is why I do it. There is nothing nicer than to sit and watch the TV or go to a match and see them playing again. In the Six Nations rugby I have at least two patients in every team and seven of my patients won Olympic medals – it makes me very proud.” ■

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