



Ironman on a mission



This month Idai Makaya discusses the inspirational case of George Watkins, a 24-year-old sportsman and endurance athlete from Hertfordshire, who survived a 500-foot fall in the Swiss Alps and came back even stronger than before – with renewed purpose and determination.

IN JUNE 2010, George Watkins completed the St Albans Half Marathon in less than two hours and the next sporting challenge in his diary is an Ironman triathlon in August 2010. George, a former student of St George's School in Harpenden, had finished high school top of his year with 4 A-Grades for his A Levels and he had gone on to graduate with a Degree in Mathematics from Imperial College in London.

However, in March 2009 George had lost his footing whilst negotiating a snowy mountainside in the Swiss Alps with two friends and had fallen down a rocky mountainside (which, incidentally, had left him with multiple injuries and numerous broken bones).

To fully convey the magnitude of what he's been through in the past year I asked George to share his story and to explain the rehabilitation journey he's had to undergo since his accident.

Idai Makaya: George, please describe the accident and explain what happened afterwards.

George Watkins: I'd been working at an Alpine ski resort for some time when on March 11, 2009, I fell about 150 metres in the mountains of Switzerland. It had been a beautiful day and up to that point had been one of the best skiing days I had ever had.

I had rushed through my morning duties and managed to get out of work early. My friends didn't manage to get out of work as quickly as I did, and so I'd waited. It is a very bad idea to go out on a day like this alone.

While my friends prepared and changed, I'd sat outside in all my gear, eager to get going. After a while I returned to my accommodation to occupy myself until they were ready and it was at this point, anticipating a long and 'extreme' day, that I had picked up my helmet (when I'd left for the first time, ready to go up the mountain, I hadn't taken it with me).

So eventually we were all ready and we caught the bus to the lift. After a few runs (all of which were on virgin snow – perfect!) we once again boarded the chairlift. On the way up I said to my two companions that I thought this would be 'the best day's skiing of the season'. I don't remember much from this point on, but I'll try to describe it as best I can.

I was going slowly and was focusing on plotting my line further down. Because of my low speed and slightly reduced concentration on what I was doing, I caught an edge and fell – not badly, but down the slope over my skis. It was really a 'nothing' fall, I was hardly moving and I had had plenty of far worse crashes all through the season.

Unfortunately, as I fell downhill, my skis then came over my head and they pulled me into a tumble. From here my memory is completely blank; all I know is what I was able to tell people in the days afterwards. My life didn't flash before my eyes; I didn't think about anything really. I was just 100 per cent focused on stopping myself falling, by any means necessary.

I was incredibly aware, possibly due to the extreme nature of what was going on and the adrenalin coursing through my mind. One thing that did pass through my mind, I told people afterwards, was the thought 'I am going to die'.

My fall came (I believe) in several stages. Rather than one continuous drop I bounced down rocks and cliffs, presumably doing more and more damage with each collision. Eventually, after what was probably the longest

drop, I landed on snow rather than rock, and came to a sudden stop in a 'bomb hole'.

I don't know how long passed, but my phone started to ring, and I somehow managed to answer it. Unfortunately, I could only utter the words 'I am in so much pain' before the battery died. I can't imagine the scare that must have given my friends!

Thankfully, I had landed in a wide snowfield, in a very obvious place, so they had no trouble finding me. They called our resort rep, the best French-speaker, and he called the piste patrol. The rep just happened to be very nearby too, with another colleague, and they joined my two other friends, who had come to a stop around 20 metres away from me, which was as close as they could get.

Some time later, the piste patroller arrived. He said he had seen my skis, 150m higher up, and was shocked by what had happened. His words, translated and cleaned up, were 'How on earth can someone survive that?'

The helicopter arrived, and realised it couldn't land on the steep slope I was on. So it dropped off a paramedic and doctor, they injected me with lots of painkillers, then loaded me onto a stretcher on a winch below the helicopter. I screamed in pain as they did this. They dropped me off on a flat plateau, landed, loaded me and flew me to hospital.

My boss, who was very supportive throughout the whole ordeal, drove down the mountain to the hospital to join me and spent the rest of the day with me in intensive care. When she called home to my mother, there was a problem with her foreign phone which meant my mum couldn't hear anything that was being said. It was left to me to call on my phone, and to tell my Mum I'd had 'a little accident'. She flew out the following morning and stayed for the entire four weeks I was out there.

The next four weeks were really difficult, as I was unable to sit up, let alone get out of bed. Three weeks later I was flown by private plane back to England, thanks to my insurance. I spent four nights in Spire Harpenden Hospital under the care of specialist orthopaedic consultant Mr Neil Davies, before I was discharged, still unable to walk (but advised by Mr Davies that being in familiar surroundings would help my state of mind, which in turn would aid my recovery).

During the next eight weeks I managed to get around in my wheelchair, although I didn't venture too far from home. The highlights of my week in fact were the hydrotherapy sessions at Spire Harpenden Hospital, which I had up to three times a week. At first, still unable to weight-bear, I would be lowered into the hydrotherapy pool before mostly just floating around and doing some upper body exercises. But before long I could actually stand in the pool because my weight was significantly reduced. The hydrotherapy was invaluable to my recovery – in fact, without it I'm not sure I would have been able to walk properly ever again.

When the 12 weeks of hydrotherapy had elapsed, I stood briefly for the first time at midnight at home (I had been waiting for this moment for so long I couldn't wait any longer!) But my first actual steps were taken at Spire Harpenden Hospital, under the supervision of the physiotherapists. I continued the hydrotherapy – working on improving my technique and strength – until I got to a point where I could take the exercises away and work on them in my

own time.

With my recovery complete, I looked for an interim job to bring in a little money – while I searched for somewhere to launch my 'career'. Again Spire Harpenden Hospital helped me with this (although I went through the normal application procedure, rather than being given special treatment).

After a few shifts – and being on my feet for up to seven hours straight – it became clear that this was a step too far, too soon. Again, my manager at Spire Harpenden Hospital was very understanding of this and kept me on – with the proviso that I wouldn't work more than five-hour shifts. It is this flexibility, and the way the hospital puts patients' and employees' interests first, that has so impressed me.

Now, after all this, on August 1, I will be lining up at the start of the UK Ironman in Bolton – along with 1,500 others – for the most gruelling day of my life and the culmination of my recovery. Without all the help I've received from family, friends, My Consultant Neil Davies – and Spire Harpenden Hospital – this would never have been possible. So should I cross the finish line (something I am fairly confident of doing!) it will not just be my triumph, but a victory for everyone involved in my recovery.

Idai Makaya: George Watkins will be raising funds for two charities based in Hertfordshire, The Willow Foundation and The Hertfordshire Air Ambulance. You can support his fundraising efforts at the UK Ironman by visiting his Just Giving sites as follows: Herts Air Ambulance: <http://justgiving.com/GeorgeWatkins-AirAmbulance>; The Willow Foundation: <http://justgiving.com/GeorgeWatkins-WillowFoundation>

I hope to be able to catch up with George early next month, shortly after the Ironman Triathlon, to see how he's done – and to get a more insightful assessment of his progress (with the help of Mr Neil Davies, the specialist who has managed his complete rehabilitation from the time he was flown back to England).

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