

Harry has made a remarkable comeback from an extremely unusual — and severe — elbow injury

‘I hadn’t fallen off in years’



## Harry Meade has returned successfully to eventing after a potentially career-ending fall in August that shattered both his elbows. Lucy Higginson meets him to learn about his remarkable journey back into the saddle, and how injury has helped him refocus on his goals

**I**T all seemed pretty straightforward as, last August, Harry Meade approached the second fence of Wellington's new advanced course. Riding a horse who had jumped clear for him all season, Harry — who is recognised as one of the most consistent and stylish cross-country jockeys — approached at a good speed and on a good stride. But the fence had a thin beam "roof" above it, which, for all his experience, caught the horse's eye.

"He just backed off and ducked," explains Harry. "He put down, chipped one in, hit the fence with his chest and somersaulted over."

"I came off with my arms outstretched as if diving into an empty swimming pool, and he came down on me."

The pain that hit Harry as he shot into the ground was immediate and excruciating.

"As my palms hit the ground, it felt as though they had detonated explosives strapped to my elbows."

The description is apt; his elbows had indeed exploded. They snapped backwards and shattered the radial heads, incurring 25 fractures, an extremely rare injury that is sometimes seen in gymnasts who land very badly while tumbling.

Among the first to him were his good friends William Fox-Pitt and Emily Baldwin.

Harry briefly wondered if he'd also broken his pelvis, but the discomfort here soon subsided; his arms remained agonising.

After five excruciating hours — "I had gas and air, and then morphine, but they didn't touch the sides" — he was in surgery.

The doctors quickly realised they would need specialists and a leading limb reconstruction surgeon was brought in for another operation four days later.

"If you threw a mug hard on to a floor, it would shatter," explains Harry. "That is what

Regular rehabilitation work with Team GBR physiotherapist Andy Thomas has built up Harry's fitness. Below left: with daughter Lily. Right: back in the saddle



had happened to my elbows."

His right elbow was in worse shape than the left, and the doctors were faced with piecing together a "pile of sawdust", as they put it.

The surgeons told Harry they would have a prosthetic elbow on standby in case they simply could not piece the right one back together, but they would use it only as a last resort.

Each year, some 100,000 hips are replaced in Britain, making them big business, but only around three elbows. Consequently there is little investment in the technology, so the replacements are not very satisfactory and the benefits questionable.

### 'Dad even came out of retirement'

"The surgeons warned me there was a 95% chance they would need to use the prosthetic elbow," Harry recalls.

He was therefore immensely relieved, on coming round, to find they had managed to screw, plate, wire and glue the original bones in both arms instead. The big question was how well the fractures would heal.

Harry's fall was the more remarkable as, apart from slipping up on the flat just a week before Wellington, he'd fallen off only once in four years of competing, schooling and hunting.

"I suppose I had one coming," he says wryly.

Once Harry came round from surgery, his wife Rosie held a phone to his ear so he could make plans for his string of horses with their owners. It was some mercy that the accident happened late in the season and the horses were not far off having their holidays.

Nevertheless, Harry's "complete star" head girl Jess Errington shouldered a huge amount

of responsibility, running the yard without her boss.

A former working pupil brought forward a planned return visit to be an extra pair of hands, and former four-star rider and ground jury member Angela Tucker has been hugely helpful, schooling some of the horses too.

"My owners have been so supportive, and extremely loyal," says Harry gratefully, "and my father [former Olympic gold medallist Richard Meade] even came out of retirement to ride some of the young horses."

But while Harry could talk, there was very little else he could do for himself with his elbows trussed up in protective braces and strapped into slings. He rapidly discovered quite how lucky he was to have met and married Rosie, who stayed with him some 16hr a day in hospital.

"The ward was short staffed and there really was no one who could feed Harry or even give him a drink," she explains. "So despite the ferocious matron, I'm afraid I refused to stick to visiting hours."

Already the mother of the then one-year-old Lily, and pregnant with their second child, she found herself dressing, washing,



Harry (with support from Lily) in the gym



Hydrotherapy helped Harry to build mobility



Harry was unable to use his elbows for 2½ months

# The H&H interview Harry Meade



Harry braving the ultra-cold cryotherapy chamber



'I was on such a high': Harry returns to competing with cross-country clears at Aldon

toothbrushing, shaving and feeding her husband for the next three months.

Back at home, "I had a baby monitor when I slept," says Harry, acutely conscious of his childlike dependency at this time.

"We slept separately as my elbows were propped on piles of pillows. I was unable to move either arm so if one slipped off a pillow it was agony and I couldn't lift it back on. I had to call into the monitor for Rosie."

Humour got them through this as much as loyalty and determination: "We wondered if it was possible for a pregnant lady to lift a guy with no arms out of the bath," laughs Harry. "I can tell you that it isn't."

Such was his degree of incapacitation that he and Rosie barely left each other's side for four months, requiring Rosie to take unpaid leave from her job as a schoolteacher.

As anyone familiar with competition animals will know, sudden bouts of box-rest are not popular.

Unable to hold a book, Harry listened to podcasts and so on — "My brain started working overtime and I found myself enjoying some quite heavy philosophical and historical lectures that I wouldn't have normally been into" — but the couple were grateful for a change of scene to avoid cabin fever.

They stayed with Rosie's parents for six weeks and were invited to visit the Bechtolsheimers by their good friend Laura (now Tomlinson) in Switzerland. Harry endured some dagger looks in the airport as he apparently refused to help his pregnant wife with suitcases, toddler or baby buggy.

A significant milestone came after about 2½ months, when Harry was finally able to feed himself again — albeit with the aid of a foot-long salad server.

With such a severe injury, was he worried about whether he would ever be able to ride again? Initially at least, this was not a priority issue, he explains.

"I love the horses and I love competing, but in a funny sort of way there were more important questions, like how disabling it would be in the long-term, and whether I would be able to earn a living to support my family."

Perhaps with this in mind as much as anything else, Harry channelled his competitive energy into promoting his recovery. The British Equestrian Federation (BEF) World Class programme, of which Harry is a member, supported him all the way.

Under the guidance of the BEF's lead physiotherapist Andy Thomas, he started a fitness programme to keep the rest of his body in shape while his arms were out of action, at Bath University's gym and more recently at Oaksey House, the Jockey Club's rehabilitation centre in Lambourn.

The pair regularly visited the sports injury and rehabilitation unit at Moulton College in Northamptonshire to improve his mobility in the hydrotherapy pool. He even used the ultra-cold cryotherapy chamber, with temperatures of -140°C helping reduce inflammation and improve circulation.

## 'I was told to think about another job'

HARRY'S progress was assessed every month by his doctors. His left arm mended well; his right elbow has been more problematic. At one point, the prosthetic elbow was considered again, but rejected.

"I was told before Christmas there was a significant chance I would not sit on a horse again, and that I should start thinking about another job," says Harry, who has a history of art degree from Bristol University. "I had a



Harry's recovery is ongoing

pretty sleepless night on Christmas Eve wondering what I could do."

But the idea of having the career you love and excel in taken from you, while devastating, can also focus the mind. It made Harry consider what he still wanted to achieve in the sport, if he could find a way back into the saddle.

"I'd love to go to the Europeans next year as a stepping stone to Rio in 2016," he says.

And find a way back he did. Having got back on a horse in January, he took five horses cross-country schooling earlier this month. Did he feel nervous after his fall?

"You don't know about that until you get back on," says Harry.

For him, the overriding emotion was unmistakable.

"I came back on a real high," he says. "The horses didn't just feel good, they felt perfect."

Then at Aldon, two weeks ago, he burst out of the start box again, on no fewer than four horses, delivering his customary cross-country clears. At Gatcombe last weekend (see p52) he finished in the top three on three of his five rides.

But how does his surgeon feel about this, given all the engineering in his arms? The answer seems to be resigned but not appalled.

Harry keeps his elbows strapped for support, and the right one is still mending. And as he continues down the path of recovery, he is striving to ensure that some positives come out of this experience, including exploring the idea of an affordable group insurance plan for eventers and other riders — Harry, like many riders, did not have personal accident insurance.

There is no sense of being hard done by in the Meade household.

"If it hadn't been my arms, it could have been my neck," says Harry simply.

Rosie adds, poignantly: "Tom Gadsby was killed only the weekend before, which reminds us just how lucky we are."

Eventing, as we all know, is a dangerous sport, no matter how well you ride.

"I would have been absolutely devastated if I'd had to stop," says Harry. "But an experience like this gives you some perspective. I adore eventing, but it isn't the be-all and end-all."

But while he has been granted a second chance to compete in the sport he loves, he seems clearer than ever about what he wants to achieve, and what he needs to do — and ride — if he is to manage it.

If, as they saying goes, it's not what happens to you, but how you react to it that matters, then Harry — and Rosie — are examples to us all. **H&H**



Harry says the fall has given him a new perspective