

Zoey Wright

Chronically Motivated

Facing an ostomy as a young woman trying to find my way in life was a very hard pill to swallow. I had just turned 20 when I was diagnosed with ulcerative colitis whilst in my first term of university studying sports science. I'd always had a love for exercising and I was finally progressing forward through education to making my passion become my career.

I knew something wasn't quite right during my final year of college, but as a typical teenager I pushed it to the side and continued to enjoy socialising with my friends, studying and exercising trying to find other ways to hide this problem I had. But unfortunately for me the problem wasn't going away and was becoming more aggressive. I remember the sense of urgency I had when I knew it was time to seek medical advice, I was on the college bus home and saw an advertisement warning people of the symptoms of bowel cancer. At that point I was using the toilet 20 + times a day and losing a considerable amount of blood, the crippling pain would wake me in the night and my energy levels were affecting my studies and sports performance.

In September 2012 I was officially diagnosed with ulcerative colitis and at the

end of November I was admitted into hospital for four weeks where not only did my family and I fear for my life due to my health deteriorating rapidly but I was faced with having my large intestine removed due to my bowel being in such a mess! I found myself in an extremely dark place even though I had walked out of that hospital two stone lighter, alive and without a bag (it was a bloody miracle).

I knew deep down that one day I would be surrendering to surgery but I wanted it to be on my terms. This was when I found myself in the gym. I had recently ruptured my anterior cruciate ligament (knee) due to a football injury and needed to complete some pre-surgery rehab to help build up my muscles for a successful reconstruction. Weight training became my therapy and I started to feel stronger. The weight I had lost was slowly increasing through both training and proper nutrition and I was starting to see my body shape change.

It was a tough time in university battling my own body, I spent a lot of time in hospital with my laptop studying and writing essays determined to finish my degree with the rest of the students, my driving goal was to wear that gown on graduation day no

matter what! I was very lucky to be under great care at the Royal Cornwall Hospital (RCH) by my consultant Dr Michell and IBID nurse Jo shepherd who both went to great lengths to get me through my degree! A week after I graduated I had my large intestine removed and it was under my terms! After a successful six months on Infliximab my body created antibodies which resulted in the treatment being no longer effective; I could continue with trialling more treatments or I could get rid of my large intestine and have a J-pouch!

I went into surgery with the idea that I'd only have my ostomy bag for a short period of time, all I cared and wanted for was the J-pouch. I was 22 years old and these were supposed to be the best years of my life. I couldn't picture myself with a bag. What would happen to my self confidence? Would my partner still find me attractive? Could I still exercise? Would I ever wear a bikini again? All of these questions had been running through my head and manifesting themselves in my mind since I was first diagnosed.

My six weeks post surgery appointment came up with my surgeon Mr May at the RCH and I was desperate to move forward with the second stage towards my J-pouch. He advised me due to being so unwell with colitis prior to my surgery I'd need up to 12 months to recover before J-pouch formation; I was heartbroken, disappointed and hated the fact I'd have to live with a bag. My body confidence took a massive hit and I found it hard some days looking at myself in the mirror, I regretted having the surgery. It wasn't until I hit 12 weeks post surgery that I



(Photography by AK - I G AK _ Annakelle)

Zoey Wright.

started thinking 'actually this isn't as bad as I first thought' I was able to go to London with my partner for a weekend away without worrying about the crippling pain I used to suffer with daily before my surgery and my anxiety surrounding needing to know where the nearest toilet was, is no longer an issue!

My surgeon cleared me to start exercising again 12 weeks post surgery however he did warn me of the risks of lifting weights and still does now 4 years later. As I already attended the gym prior to my surgery my core muscles were well conditioned and using a suitable form of support wear has been a habit I've gotten

into by the advice from my awesome stoma nurses from the very beginning.

Fast-forward 10 months to October 2015 after my surgery and a lot of training & strict dieting I competed in my first ever fitness modelling show in the transformation & figure category. I didn't expect to win anything, for me I had already won by stepping on stage in a bikini in front of 100s of people, so when they announced my name as the winner for both categories and securing a place in the world championships, where an overall title was up for grabs, and becoming the face of Pure Elite I couldn't hold back the tears and I was all set to compete at the world championships just eight weeks after qualifying. Unfortunately two weeks after the show I was rushed in for emergency surgery due to a bowel obstruction so my dream of becoming an 'overall' title winner had to be put on hold!

I came back strongest in September 2016 qualifying for the world championship again and stepped onto the world stage in October 2016 at the O2 Arena and was awarded runner up for the overall title. This show just fuelled my fire even more to achieve that overall status. The fitness industry is extremely image orientated so for me to become the face of a fitness modelling federation despite my ostomy bag was a goal I wanted to smash!

For a whole year I dedicated myself to training with the goal in mind and in November 2017 I was announced as the overall world champion. From gaining this achievement I became a sponsored athlete with USN (Ultimate Sports Nutrition) one of



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the biggest supplement companies in the world and along the way to becoming an overall winner. I launched my own clothing company with my partner Conor called 'Chronically Motivated' to reach and inspire 100s of people around the world to join the movement and become a part of the community of people overcoming life's challenges.

If you had told me after my first surgery I would have embraced my ostomy as much

as I have I wouldn't believe them. If somebody had told me I would have become a professional fitness model I would have called them crazy. Going through the challenges I've faced living with IBD unlocked the potential I would have never discovered.

I have lived with my ileostomy for just over four years now and if it wasn't for the on-going issues I had with my rectal stump in the last couple of years I would have happily kept myself as I was. My stump needed to be removed as I was beginning to struggle with it on a daily basis so after long discussions with my surgeon I was booked in for surgery with J-pouch formation at the end of January.

I have found this recovery tough compared to my first surgery in 2014. I walked into surgery at my fittest and strongest, as in 2014 I was really unwell. It has been hard on me mentally at times especially not being able to do my job as a fitness Instructor. I went from exercising sometimes twice a day to not being able to walk up the stairs without my legs burning. I've lost weight and some days my temporary loop ileostomy can be a devil, but I wouldn't change any of it. This is a part of the journey to my J-pouch and I'm embracing the good, the bad and ugly along the way!

My takedown surgery will be around the end of April and it's a very bittersweet feeling. I will miss my stoma but I'll always



Zoey Wright with her award.

carry on being grateful for everything it's taught me, beauty is only skin deep and what's inside is really what matters. I hope to continue inspiring others around the world by sharing my journey and documenting my life with a J-pouch.

I know it may be a rocky road at the start but I'm confident that with the support of my medical team I'll be fit and back in action in no time!

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