A LIFE without limits

The Paralympics has shown how cutting-edge artificial limb design has become. Jeremy Miles went to the Dorset/Hampshire border to visit one of the world’s finest prosthetics clinics to discover more.
Dorset action man Neil Heritage has rowed the Atlantic, competed in a triathlon and become a dynamic coach at one of the county’s leading fitness boot camps. Oh yes, and he also took part in the Jubilee River Pageant rowing up the Thames with Olympic ambassadors Sir Steve Redgrave and Matthew Pinsent.

It’s impressive stuff by anyone’s standards but utterly remarkable when you consider that in November 2004 this 31-year-old former soldier lost both legs in a suicide bombing in Iraq. Terribly injured and evacuated home as a double above-the-knees amputee he was told he would probably never walk again. Neil didn’t want to hear that and resolved that he would not spend the rest of his life in a wheelchair.

From those early days facing a bleak future from the bed of a military hospital, this determined father of two has battled to not only achieve the level of fitness required to live a physically active life but also to obtain the very best artificial legs for the job.

Happily one of the world’s finest prosthetics clinics is just a short drive from Neil’s home in Poole. Dorset Orthopaedics, established in 1989 by its inspirational Managing Director, Bob Watts, enjoys an international reputation for its work, producing state-of-the art limbs of the highest possible standard. Committed to achieving comfort and functionality alongside the specific needs of the individual, the clinic attracts many high-profile customers to its HQ on Dorset/Hampshire border.

Whether they want high-tech bionic running blades or a super-realistic silicone finish that re-creates their exact skin-tone, Bob Watts and his team have the answers.

As I watched Leo in action at the Knighton Heath Golf Club outside Poole practising for this summer’s British Junior Open Championship, his father Ian told me more: “He only started playing golf last year. Straight away we could see he was a natural. The Club Pro thought he was absolutely amazing. He had no idea that he only had one hand.” Unfortunately there was an inevitable limit as to how far Leo could progress playing left-handed so Ian contacted Bob who produced a prototype golf hand. “It’s transformed Leo’s game. Bob is amazing!”

Dorset Orthopaedic’s client list includes American model and athlete Aimee Mullins, Dorset-based Paralympic sailor Steve Thomas and Ellie-May Challis the plucky eight-year-old who made national headlines after losing both her legs and hands to meningitis. There are of course many others - from babies who are just a few months old to World War II veterans in their 80s.
Bob has fond memories too of the redoubtable but now sadly deceased Mrs Nancy Farqharson, who became the oldest person in Britain to receive a prosthetic leg when she was 88-years-old. He even gave her a free leg as a 100th birthday present. “She was great fun,” he says.

One suspects he has slightly different memories of the mercurial former Mrs Paul McCartney, Heather Mills, who was with the clinic for a number of years but hasn’t been in touch since a disagreement about an appointment for fitting a leg.

Bob is adamant that all measurements have to be absolutely accurate. “She said she didn’t have the time to come for the appointment. “I said ‘If you haven’t got the time then I haven’t either.’ She hasn’t been back for three years.”

He shrugs. He spent a lot of time with Mills. Flying to Los Angeles for her performances on TV’s Dancing With the Stars and driving to London every week when she was in Dancing On Ice. “She wanted me there in case anything went wrong with her leg. I’ve done it for the Paralympic team too. They used to call me ‘the spanner man’.”

Needless to say Bob is much more than a mere spanner man. As an engineer and designer his attention to detail is extraordinary. He and his team can produce limbs with freckles, hair patterns, blemishes, anything you want.

When 10-year-old double amputee Lydia Cross was invited to lay a wreath at the Cenotaph for Help for Heroes last year, Bob created special silicone cosmeses for the occasion giving her a pair of blue legs decorated with red poppies.

“She loved them and her friends thought they were really cool. It’s really good to be able give people something that either helps express individuality or really looks as though it’s a part of them.”
To illustrate the point Bob shows me a range of limbs including an arm being created for a woman in her seventies that appeared perfectly aged with veins, liver spots and slightly swollen knuckles. At the other end of the spectrum there was a leg complete with audio speaker and iPod dock.

Neil Heritage doesn’t bother about cosmetic niceties. He simply wants legs that work as efficiently as possible. He rejects the idea of going for a realistic look on purely practical grounds. “The silicone actually weighs quite a bit and for someone like me that’s an issue,” he explains.

As a regular runner and a fitness instructor at the Reboot Boot Camp at Charmouth, Neil often wears shorts. He insists that he has no problem with people staring at his artificial legs. “I don’t mind at all. It’s interesting.”

Ironically after battling so hard to stay out of a wheelchair, Neil’s toughest physical challenge to date - rowing the Atlantic as part of the six man Row2Recovery team - temporarily put him straight back into one. The massive effort required to row 3,000 miles caused his stumps to shrink and on his return Bob was enlisted to make him new legs. “I lost two stone on that crossing and had to rebuild my muscles,” says Neil. “I was back in a wheelchair but thanks to Bob, not for long.” He has no regrets about signing up for the challenge. “I can’t tell you the psychologically boost I get from doing things that frankly not many people with legs can do.” As he points out rowing the Atlantic has made him a member of a very elite club. “More people have been into space,” he chuckles. “Not bad eh?”

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