

Tom's December 2012 Shoulder Repair

I do not think you will find this particularly entertaining or interesting, but you asked.

The procedure was a "reverse total shoulder replacement", done on December 20.

My shoulders have hurt for years but that is normal for old laborers and old athletes. I suppose I qualify on both counts.

By October pain from the right shoulder reached the point where it was impossible to sleep for more than ten minutes while lying down. The pain would build until it woke me. Sitting in a chair was better. I knew I needed surgery but I did not intend to stop working during the fall harvest season. Shoulder function was severely limited but the arm itself was able to do a day's heavy work just fine.

I made an early November appointment with the surgeon who replaced my hips and knees. He had offered to work on my shoulders the last time I saw him.

We had an MRI done. When the MRI report came back my surgeon called and said the shoulder was a mess. He referred me to a shoulder expert.

The shoulder surgeon was not anxious to take it on either. It turns out I had seen him ten years ago for a different issue. Being a shoulder guy he had given me a brief shoulder check up at that time and said I needed rotator cuff repair.

I ignored him.

He kept his notes. He brought his notes with him to our 2012 visit. He mentioned that he could have fixed this easily in 2002.

I understand his frustration but I doubt that surgery in 2002 would have prevented surgery in 2012. As near as I can tell life as I am living it is a journey toward total wear out. I accept that.

In any case he pointed out that I was no longer a candidate for rotator cuff repair or conventional shoulder replacement. I no longer had a rotator cuff or a shoulder joint.

The rotator cuff consists of four muscle and tendon sets that control the arm. The supraspinatus lifts the arm and the infraspinatus rotates the arm. From the MRI he guessed that the supraspinatus had been totally ripped off for five years. The infraspinatus was also severely torn. Rotator cuff repair was impossible.

The cuff not only rotates the arm. It also holds the head of the humerus in the shallow shoulder socket. In the years since the cuff was destroyed the head of the humerus had worked upward through the top of the socket.

The socket was beyond repair and the head of the humerus had been ground off.

In addition one of the two elements of the biceps muscle is completely ripped from the shoulder.

The tendon of this long biceps normally wraps over the head of the humerus and passes through a sheath before it attaches to the scapula. When I flex my arm I get what is called a "Pop Eye" bulge. The loose muscle and free tendon bunch up near my elbow. The surgeon said he would not even try to repair that.

I ruined this biceps tendon with the help of a bucking horse last summer.

Don't ask. I am not ready to talk about it yet.

The reverse shoulder replacement procedure is the only remedy for a shoulder like mine. The reverse procedure has been done in the US since 2005. The reverse part means that the end of the scapula which naturally contains the socket is leveled off and a half ball is placed with long screws. The head of the humerus is cut off and a socket on a stem is hammered into it. The stem is driven down the center of the humerus. This is similar to a hip replacement.

The rotator muscles are abandoned.

The revised arm is lifted by the deltoid muscle only.

The "reverse" is required because without a cuff to hold the humerus in the socket, the deltoid muscle tends to pull the humerus up and out of the natural socket. This action is what ruined my shoulder socket in the first place. Switching the ball to the scapula changes the mechanical construct and the deltoid does no harm when it lifts. There is a weight and force limitation to prevent the deltoid from breaking the new socket.

That is about all there is. The pain post-op dropped below the pre-op pain on day five.

The other shoulder needs serious work also but until we do the MRI it will not be known whether it is a candidate for normal or reverse replacement.

Gail wants it fixed yet this winter. I would like to put that off until next winter. Joint replacement is not much fun.

If you have questions, just ask. Tom