

Becoming Bionic

by Mary L. Peachin

Moaning and groaning are commonplace in senior social circles. The members of my husband David's ski group, now celebrating their 30th annual trip, have established a time limit—a trip total of five minutes is all that's allowed to share stories about their aches and pains. Those conversations might include updates about Jim's new hip, Mark's upcoming knee replacement, or Ed's pending surgery and his need to borrow a walker. Thrilling, daredevil stuff.

As people age so do their joints, as have mine.

Looking back over the past 60-plus years, I have been fortunate to have had many opportunities and a hell of a good time wearing out my joints. I was Tucson's 25-yard Himmel Park freestyle-swim champion at the age of six. I swam for the YMCA at Davis-Monthan's base pool, played USTA tennis, spent snowy weekends swooshing—and tumbling—down Mt. Lemmon's ski slope, and horseback riding at the El Conquistador Hotel's stable, on the site of present-day El Con Mall. By the time my joints were approaching middle age, I was competing in international sport-fishing tournaments and scuba diving, and still do. The latter is generally joint friendly, but schlepping scuba gear and hauling myself out of the water—as quickly as possible when sharks are shopping for takeout nearby—is challenging.

Tennis elbow was my first joint issue. The second was deterioration of my right shoulder. Following a series of X-rays, I was shocked to learn I had no cartilage in ANY of my major joints. It had left without so much as a quick “good-bye.” If I had known, I would have given it a proper sendoff or maybe put it to use elsewhere. I recycle.

Down the orthopaedic path I crept, with a strong wind pushing me from behind.

Under the care of an orthopaedic surgeon in Tucson, I received cortisone injections and anti-inflammatory

drugs, which relieved the pain for a while. During summers, I received physical therapy in Vancouver, BC, where we live part of the year. About 10 years ago, my Tucson surgeon gave me an ultimatum: “Don't come back to see me until you're ready to have BOTH shoulders replaced. No more cortisone or drugs.”

To be truthful, I've been thrown out of some nice places, but this toss was a bit scary, and I landed hard. Seeking a less frightening path, I did some serious homework, which led me to an orthopaedic surgeon at the University of Washington. He told me he could extend the life of my right shoulder—to which I was personally attached—by doing a “clean and ream” of the troubled joint.

“Hi-ho the derry-o” a cleaning-and-reaming I went.

Seven years later, my doctor in Vancouver—while giving me a cortisone shot—said, “Mary, you've been suffering with this shoulder for 10 years, why don't you take care of it while you're in relatively good physical condition?”

It wasn't long before my UW surgeon made me the wide-eyed owner of a brand-new titanium right shoulder.

(Gosh, I've surpassed my five minutes of moaning and groaning, and I haven't even complained about my deteriorating hips.)

When it was time for a new hip, my UW doctor referred me to a physician in Seattle—his daughter—who had installed his new hip. Several weeks later, sedated with a spinal block and propofol, I was on her operating table being introduced to my new hip.

Six months later, when my other hip retired, I was given only a week's notice before its replacement was hired and put to work. The short notice was necessary because my doctor was preparing for her own new arrival—a baby.

Before and after my hip surgeries, I worked hard in physical therapy—and still do—strengthening my core. It all

paid off. Last fall I came in third in the International Women's Billfish Tournament in Guatemala. I continue to work as a travel writer, and I'm writing this article between trips to Oaxaca, Mexico, where I ate *chapulines* (grasshoppers) and *chicatanas* (flying ants); to Guerrero, Mexico, where I will rooster fish along the Zihuatanejo surf; and to Baja California Sur, Mexico, where I will snorkel with whale sharks and scuba dive.

My left shoulder—the cartilage gone forever—occasionally grates, but it remains basically painless. The shoulder that's served me since birth might look dreadful on an X-ray, but it's still on the job.

I hope the surgical part of my becoming bionic is over, but I continue to learn how to live with my replacement parts. Unlike the science-fiction transformation of the character Jaime Sommers in the 1970s television series *The Bionic Woman*, my transformation, I am pleased to report, is not science fiction but science fact.

However, adjusting to my bionic body hasn't been without challenges. Anyone who has had a joint replaced probably has some lingering disability issues. I was mortified to have anyone see me using a walker or a wheelchair. I was finished with the walker within a week of hip surgery, but initially a wheelchair was a necessity when I had to traverse any large airport. (Hurray for our Tucson International Airport, which I have always been able to navigate without a wheelchair.) I'm not happy with the continual need for TSA pat-downs when my titanium and porcelain joints light up on their security screens; but I am happy that I recently was able to conquer a 17-hour international flight from Athens, and I am ready to tackle more travel challenges ... albeit glowing as I go.

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Mary Peachin is a local freelance writer. Comments for publication should be addressed to letters@desertleaf.com.