

My Acoustic Neuroma Journey

By Danielle Gibbons



Blog Entry 1 - An introduction

For those of you who don't know me, my name is Danielle Gibbons, I'm 22, and I play football professionally for Liverpool Ladies. Around 2 years ago I found out that I had an acoustic neuroma (or Vestibular Schwannoma), which is a benign brain tumour growing on the vestibulocochlear nerve that helps control hearing and balance. In May this year (2015) I will be undergoing brain surgery to have the tumour removed because it has grown faster than expected.

When I found out that I had it I didn't really know what to think or feel, and I definitely didn't know what to expect. As is the usual protocol these days I turned to Google for some insight into it, and inevitably came across some of the 'worst case scenario, horror stories,' which I tried to ignore. I was hoping to find a success story from someone within football that could put my mind at ease to a certain extent. I didn't want this tumour to end my football career because I'd worked so hard to get myself to the level that I was at. I soon realised there wasn't anyone that I could find, so then I looked to anyone else in sport. Again, I drew a blank. Rubbish. I'd read blogs from people who had come through the treatments, but they weren't in sport so I found it difficult to compare my own path to theirs.

I'd never even heard of an acoustic neuroma (AN) before I was told that I had one, so for that reason, as well as the fact I couldn't find anyone else in sport that had had one, I wanted to put myself out there and document my journey as I undergo my operation and embark on my return to fitness afterwards. If other people find themselves in a similar situation to me, be it brain tumour or any other obstacle, I don't want them to feel alone.

Looking back I think it had been with me for a while. After finding out what the symptoms of an AN are, I've realised that over the years I've been experiencing a lot of them. My spells of dizziness, vertigo and high levels of fatigue had always randomly appeared during my childhood. I'd visited the doctors on numerous occasions to try and work out why I had the symptoms but they had always attributed it to a growth spurt, anaemia or my low blood pressure, but none of which were drastically low so didn't warrant any treatment. I'm not entirely sure that these were caused by my tumour, but the chances are they were. As my surgeon has said, I've probably had this tumour for years but just never known about it. So hopefully having it removed will put an end to these annoying dizzy and fatigued spells!

So from now up until my operation, and in the time afterwards I'm going to document my progress, obstacles, high and lows, to give an insight into the condition and into my life post-surgery.

Blog Entry 2 – Finding Out

Discovering the tumour came out of the blue. I was living in Preston at the time while I was finishing my last year at university. I woke up one morning with a ringing in my ear and a slight dullness, kind of like when you go to a concert and have a cold rolled into one. And no, I hadn't been out clubbing the night before! I'd been at training with Liverpool and because we trained on an artificial 3G pitch I'd just presumed I had a rubber ball stuck in there. For the next few days I'd tried all the tricks that you do when trying to clean your ear. Laying on my side, upside down, you name it. I'd tried everything and the 'rubber ball' hadn't cleared. I started to worry that it could get infected so, after about a week or so I went to hospital to get it checked out, only to be told by the doctor that I had a head cold. After assuring him that I didn't and I felt fine, he went on to say that I did, but just didn't know (I didn't have a cold!).

The tinnitus and dullness still hadn't gone a couple of weeks later, so I went to see my own doctor who referred me, that same night, to the ENT (ear, nose and throat) team at Preston Hospital. They did their thing and also said that it was clear and looked fine but as I was very healthy and physically fit, as a precaution they sent me for a head MRI scan. I wasn't really worried about it, it was just annoying that I could hear ringing 24/7.

I week later I had my scan. It didn't feel anything out of the ordinary, I'd already had my fair share of MRI scans thanks to my ACL injury back in 2012. A few days after it though I had a call from the hospital saying there had been a cancellation and so my appointment with the specialist for the scan results had been brought forward. I thought nothing of it, if anything I considered cancelling because I thought there was no point and somebody else may as well take the earlier slot. My mum convinced me to go anyway, so off I went, on my own, as my mum was busy at work, and I didn't expect to be told anything untoward as I felt fit and well. They called me in, and everything was normal until I went into the room.

There were 5 people in there, which was totally not what I expected and at this point I knew something was off. For the next half an hour the doctor spoke at me, and very little was going in. All I heard was "brain tumour" and very little went in after that. Thankfully mine isn't cancerous. I don't think I really showed any reaction after the appointment, so much so that the nurse followed me into the waiting room to check that I was okay. I was absolutely fine until she asked me... and then I started crying. I think I was just in shock.

I kept going through phases of being really worried about it, to being really scared too. I think a lot of this was because I didn't really understand it all. At this point I hadn't yet had an appointment with the specialists. My nurse, Andrea, phoned me to explain a little bit more about the whole thing before I went to my appointment. As nurses go, I couldn't have asked for anyone better. She's been a rock for both me and my parents, her door is always open and she's always on hand to answer any questions we have. I'm sure she's #1 on my mum's speed dial!

My first appointment with the specialist was quite nerve-wracking and stressful at the same time. For the most part I put thought of this brain tumour to the back of my mind and tried to forget about it as best I could, but when my appointments come around I don't have a choice. It was a family outing, me and my parents, and it was good to finally get some answers. Knowing a lot more about the treatments and outlook was very reassuring.

I'll tell you a little bit more about ANs. As I've already mentioned, they're non-cancerous tumours that usually grow very slowly and cause problems by pressing on the surrounding tissues, which in

my case is my hearing and balance nerve, next to my facial nerve. It won't spread to other parts of my brain but its growth could interfere with other functions. They're also most likely to be found in people aged 40-60 which was why the specialists were so interested in my case.

Their first surprise was that I had one, so they certainly didn't expect it to grow. But because I have it so young they were worried that it could be associated to an inherited (genetic) condition called neurofibromatosis type 2 (NF2). This is a genetic condition that causes tumours to grow along nerves in the body and can spread to other parts of the body. After a genetic screening and spinal scan they concluded that I 99% didn't have NF2. Such a massive relief.

After this, the specialists told me more about the AN. They said that the chances are that nothing would ever come of it, it might not even grow, at least not for years to come. Obviously they didn't say they knew for certain but they just told me about the majority of cases. I've always had a tendency to be a bit unique though..... They did inform me of the options should anything change in the future; brain surgery, radiotherapy, and monitoring.

Ever since finding out I'd continued to play football and finish off my final year at university. The start of all of this seems so far away now. I carried on having phases of dizziness and fatigue, and sometimes I'd be sat down and felt like the world was spinning around me. I tried my best not to let any of it affect me too much, I figured that people were going through a lot worse than me and still getting on with it, so I wanted to do the same. A lot of my strength comes from my parents and how they deal with the health problems they face each day.

For the following year I didn't really have to think about it too much, other than when my symptoms decided to show their face. I carried on with the football season as normal and awaited my annual scan which came at the end of September, just as we were about to embark on our first ever Champions League venture. I received a letter from the hospital as I was away with Liverpool in Sweden. I had no idea about it while I was away, but my mum had read it (she doesn't usually read my letters) and was by all accounts really upset, which is to be expected. She'd just read that her daughter had a brain tumour that had grown and now required an intervention. My parents decided to wait until I was back before they showed me the letter, they didn't want to tell me over the phone or while I was away. I'm grateful for that because although I was fine at first (I half expected it because my hearing had got worse), the following days were pretty tough as the news sank in.

My mum had already spoken to Andrea, my specialist skull base nurse at Salford Royal, on several occasions since finding out (no surprise there....) so she was well informed about what to expect. Due to the rate of growth, its size and my age they highly recommended taking the tumour out rather than radiotherapy. My tumour is relatively small so having the brain surgery now would reduce the risk of the operation. It seemed like a no brainer to me (no pun intended). My gut instinct was to have the surgery, and that's what I stuck to. There were times when I'd break down and cry when the worry would build up. I'd have negative moments when I'd worry about how it would affect football, how long I'd be out with the surgery, if I'd be able to play again, if my club would want me afterwards. Of course most of those were pointless worries because the outlook is relatively positive. After talking to the medical staff and my manager at the club it was decided that I'd try and get the operation done and out the way as soon as possible. Our playing season is over summer, so pre-season starts in January. Best case scenario was that I'd have my operation before Christmas, although I knew that this would be a long shot.

Blog Entry 3 – 1st Appointment after growth results

The appointment that came after my last scan results was the scariest to date. I'd decided that the worst case scenario would be that I can't have my operation until the start of the season (around March time) because that would mean all preseason would be for nothing and I'd miss the first half of the season. After the surgery the usual procedure is 6 to 9 days in hospital followed by 4 weeks without raising my heart rate too much (I'd have a hole in my skull after all). Then after three months I can go into normal training again. This timeline is for the 'average' person. I'd like to think that I'm not the average person so my goal is to beat what they've said (don't worry mum, I'll be sensible).

My appointment was in November, and I was keeping everything crossed that I could have it before Christmas so I wouldn't miss too much of preseason and the season. Although the majority of me was nervous, I was still a bit excited at the same time because I hate the unknown and at least I'd have some idea of what was going to happen to me.

When we went into the consultant's room the radiographer was there too to explain that area of treatment, although after discussing my options, all of them felt that surgery was the best option, and I did too. So then I was told all about the surgery, how it would happen, what the risks are. Amongst other things they also told me that because the tumour was close to my facial nerve there was a chance that I could have some weakness in my face. Short term effects could last around 6 to 12 months... SIX to 12 MONTHS?! That was not what I called short term. They told me all the usual risks that you'd have expected with brain surgery, all of which scared me a lot, but I'd expected and partly prepared myself so I could deal with it. What I hadn't prepared for was the time I'd have to spend away from exercise, which to most people might not sound a big problem at all. However, my close family and friends know about my eating disorder and how I've struggled with it for years, and I was told that I couldn't do any activity other than walking for the first 4 weeks. This was my worst nightmare. It's still one of the most worrying things about the operation, which I know sounds silly considering what I'm about to have done. But I've struggled with my eating for years, and have just finally started to overcome it. At the minute I'm feeling more positive about that phase, I just hope it stays that way. I hadn't expected not being able to do anything, I just presumed diving around was out of the question. Maybe I was/am too unrealistic about my recovery. Time will tell.

The second, and probably the worst news was that I couldn't have my operation before Christmas, and that the earliest it would be is in the middle of February. Smack bang in the middle of preseason, exactly the time that I didn't want it to be. Perfectly aligned with my worst case scenario. After hearing the time frame for post-surgery and that I could only have my operation mid-February at the earliest was too much, and I started to cry, and as the tissues started to be edged towards me it showed no signs of stopping...

After the first 4 weeks I'd be able to start building my fitness up, and then after 12 weeks my surgeons would be happy for me to do whatever I want, so hopefully that means back into training. I soon put this into perspective (I say 'soon', it took me a couple of weeks), 12 weeks isn't actually that long when you compare it to how long I was out with my ACL injury. It could be a lot worse. I'd also have permanent deafness in my left ear, and would have to rebuild my balance afterwards. Both of these don't seem too drastic, they aren't ideal but are things that I can cope with. To remove the tumour they have to remove a part of my skull which will be plugged with fatty tissue from my stomach (free liposuction, woohoo!). I'll always have a small hole behind my

ear, so because of that I'll have to wear a skull cap or head guard when I play afterwards. Peter Cech eat your heart out!

I spoke to my manager Matt Beard soon after and told him the news, which I was really nervous about. Within a week I'd seen the club doctor and he'd reassured me a lot, thanks to his past experience with an ice hockey player that had successfully been through the same as me. The club have been amazing so far. I couldn't have asked for anything more. After a few phone calls and emails it was decided that the best time for the operation would be after the first half of the season, around May 11th. Thanks to the Women's World Cup being over the summer this year we have a large gap between fixtures and it seemed to fit pretty well, at least I'll be able to do the full preseason and first half of the season. What will happen after that nobody knows. I aim to be back to nearly full fitness come the end of the second half of the season. I think it's good that I have that as a target. Matt has been brilliant too. He's reassured me throughout of my position at the club and told me to focus on the first half of the season, trying not to worry about what'll happen after May. I know it might seem strange that I've scheduled my brain surgery around the football season, but football is my life, my passion and it's what I enjoy doing the most. I want to make the most of being able to play while I can, and if having my operation later than initially planned is the case then so be it. If it's the best for the team, then it's the best for me. Of course I wouldn't have waited if there was an immediate threat to my life or if this added length of time would increase the risk of surgery greatly but I was told there was no issue and that they were willing to wait until August/September. So that's the plan, after our last game of the first half of the season on the 10th May I'm having the tumour removed. Bring. It. On.

Blog Entry 4 – Telling people

Telling my parents was the hardest thing. I literally didn't know where to start so I came out with "it's not cancer... but I have a brain tumour". Probably not the best opening line I could have come out with (sorry about that mum). The worst part for me was knowing my parents would be upset, even more so because they felt terrible that I had been to the appointment on my own. At the beginning I didn't really bother about telling people. The surgeons had initially said that there was a very high chance that nothing would happen with the tumour and it would never grow, at least not until I was heading towards 40. So I felt like there was no point in telling people. I didn't want to cause any unnecessary drama. Of course I told my closest family and friends, and some of the staff at Liverpool, but other than that I kept it to myself.

Before I made the blog public I told my teammates at the club about my tumour and what was about to happen. I wanted to be the one to tell them rather than finding out by reading this or seeing it on Twitter. I planned to tell them after one of the team meetings, and I'll be honest, it was a lot harder than I thought it would have been. As it was getting closer to the time of breaking the news I started to get really nervous, and then when I eventually stood up I felt like I was about to cry. After composing myself outside (with the help of a few others) I managed to get the words out and explain the most part to them. Unsurprisingly it didn't come out as I'd practiced. It's quite funny looking back but I can assure you that I didn't find it funny at the time. My voice was just about holding together and I don't think I had any control over my arms and hands.... they were all over the place. Touching my face. Itching my arm. Holding the chair. Tipping the chair. My nervous side definitely took over.

Their reaction was great though, exactly what I expected really as we are a close team. They all said they'd support me through it and seemed genuinely concerned. It means a lot to me, a lot more than they'll ever realise. Telling them was a weight off my mind too. Afterwards I found out that some of the girls were upset by my news, I didn't like the thought of that. I heard that some of them didn't really know what to say to me afterwards and for that I don't blame them at all. I didn't know what to say to myself for weeks after I found out so I didn't expect them to know what to say straight after I'd just told them. It's not the easiest thing to get your head around. 2 years after my first appointment I think it's just about sunk in, though I think a lot of that it down to writing this.

Blog Entry 5 – Honesty

I've said a little bit about how I'm feeling as I've been writing this blog so far, but there are still some things that I haven't had the chance to say but I feel they're important. The past 2 years have been far from easy for either myself or my parents and not just because of this brain tumour, there have been many other things that have tested our resolve that very few people are aware of. That being said, without those life tests I don't think that I'd be able to remain as positive as I'm feeling at the minute. As cliché as it is, tough times really do make people stronger. I won't lie, sometimes there are days where I've sat on my bed and cried at the thought of surgery and the fear of my life changing for the worse. But these periods don't last long and I tend to pick myself back up and get on with it, usually thanks to people who have no idea that they've just helped me. I don't usually tell anyone when that happens, I don't like to make a fuss and I definitely don't want my parents to worry about me any more than they already do. I realise that they'll read this and my secret will be out, but I feel I need to be open if I want people in the same position to be able to relate to me, so 'so be it'.

Although having a brain tumour is a pretty serious thing, that's not the main problem I have with this whole situation, instead it feels more like an inconvenience. I just want to be able to focus on my football, without issues cropping up making it more difficult which I find really frustrating. Don't get me wrong, as soon as I have my pre-op and May starts getting closer I'm sure I'll start to get more anxious. But at the minute I wish it was just all over, then I can get on with things, without knowing I have to stop. I hate being a burden on people, especially with my parents, they have enough on their plate already. As do some of my friends.

It's definitely not all bad though, not at all. Most of the time when I think of the surgery it makes me happy and positive (weird, I know). Let me explain. When I think of the operation my mind often wanders to what I'll be losing and what I'll be missing out on as I recover. For this reason I get an instant surge of positivity because it makes me appreciate everything that I already have and re-energises me to make the most of it. So it's not all bad, just sometimes. As my mum keeps reminding me, having the tumour removed is a means to an end. Hopefully I'll no longer have dizzy or tired spells and I won't have anything hanging over me. It's a fresh start and I can put all of my focus back on the things that matter to me the most, family, friends and football.

Writing this has also helped me, which I wasn't really expecting. It's nice to release all of the worry and tension I'm feeling and get it out of my head. So if you're going through anything at all that's bothering you or weighing you down then take my advice and try writing it down. You don't have

to show anyone, you can just get it out there and look at it. It might help you see that some things aren't worth worrying about, or that there are things you can do to help yourself.

Blog Entry 6 - Pre-Op

As the operation looms I'm starting to get more and more anxious about it, and thinking how much I wish none of this was happening. But then at the same time, I'm thinking that it'll be a positive in some way and that I need to stop feeling sorry for myself. It builds up, I have a couple of days where I feel pretty low, and then I'm back to normal and want to get to the operation straight away.

I wasn't sure how I'd feel about the pre op, because usually I feel worse afterwards because everything was brought to the forefront and I'd be forced to think about it. Football usually keeps me busy and distracted. I woke up feeling as I usually do the day before an appointment, on the surface I was trying to feel indifferent but inside there was a significant amount of worry. I think the fact that I've just written "trying to feel" shows that it wasn't being suppressed as much as I'd have thought.

The first part of the pre-op was just me and my parents in a room with Andrea, my specialist nurse. She's so brilliant, and I could see that my mum was relieved after speaking to her, which was comforting to me too. After I'd worked my way through my list of questions that I had for her, we just discussed what was likely to happen afterwards and what would happen during my surgery. I knew the majority of it, but some parts were better than expected. I could be away in theatre for up to 8 to 10 hours, which is fine with me because I'll be out of it, not so much for my parents who will be pacing and clocking up the miles while they wait. I've told them to go shopping or do something to pass the time, but I think the chances of them actually doing that and not staying worrying in the ward are pretty unlikely.

Andrea was telling me about what will happen in the first week after my operation, It was pretty horrible, I won't go into major details, but she did make a Harry Potter reference which amused me. I'll feel really tired after my operation as my body adjusts to my loss of balance and hearing, and simple things like talking and reading will make me feel like I need a power nap. Apparently it's a feeling similar to when dementors suck the life out of you. I'm a fan of Harry Potter, so I'll be channelling my inner-wizard and casting my Patronus Charm to get my energy back. (I hope you Harry Potter fans appreciate that joke).

The rest of the pre-op was just pretty standard, checking medical history and all that. The longer I was sat there, the longer I just wanted to get started with my recovery. Andrea was telling me about the balance testing I'll be doing the first couple of days after my operation, having cards to look at that test my balance more. Is it strange that this makes me a little bit excited? Because a pretty big percentage of me feels like I'm looking forward to those. I like a challenge. Granted, this whole process is more than just a little challenge, but that doesn't stop me from looking forward to it, at least a little bit anyway. I'd like to think that comes from my life as a sports person, always seeking challenges to overcome and ways to win. Regardless of whether or not it's strange for me to feel like this it's still helping me get through it, each little challenge is something to focus on. Small steps and small victories as they say, and then in no time I'll be back on my feet (hopefully without falling over...) and getting back into football a stronger person.

Blog Entry 7 - Operation Delayed

I don't really know where to start on this one. Usually I try to be really optimistic, looking at the positives, but at this moment in time I'm struggling. I thought that this week (4th May onwards) would be my last full week of training before my operation, and that I'd find out a definite date for my surgery. So that in itself was getting to me. I didn't feel myself and it felt like the front I was putting on, of being all happy and resilient, was being broken down. I felt alone, even though I knew people were there for me. My moods were changing from really positive to feeling like I had the weight of the world on my shoulders in the space of 5 minutes, which seemed to go on constantly. Now, I'm a massive fan of rollercoasters but this type is not my idea of fun. It was exhausting. Going from a high to a low, but having to pretend the low wasn't happening so I didn't appear like I was going crazy.

This happened for the first few days of the week, and then I started to snap myself out of it, with the help of talking to a few of those close to me. I was starting to see the bigger picture and focus back on the positives, back to my normal self. This was all good, but I still knew I had to wait to find out when my actual surgery date was. Finding this out would be the final piece of the puzzle to get me back to how good I'd been feeling about things for these past few weeks.

Any building optimism was soon crushed under a mountain of disappointment though when I found out that the next available date... early July. Absolutely devastated. I've said before how important football is to me, and hearing this news meant that I'd almost definitely miss the second half of the season, and that they would have to bring somebody else in to cover me. Which is also devastating because I'd worked so hard and felt I'd been doing well, for it to all be taken away from me if whoever came in had an absolute worldie and fitted in to the team perfectly. I was worried about what Matt would say too. I didn't want to disappoint him or let him down, and I didn't want to do that to the girls either.

I didn't know what to think, what to feel, or what to do. I'd been waiting so long to have the tumour removed and as far as I was aware it was only 3 or 4 weeks away. For the past months/year I'd been putting it all to the back of my mind thinking that I didn't need to worry about it until it came nearer the time, and all of that was starting to boil up to the surface. So the news about the date blew the lid off and I started to fall apart. I don't know if it was the news itself, or a buildup of emotions over such a long time that caused it, but I broke down. Maybe it was long overdue, but it still wasn't enjoyable. I hate being weak, I've tried to be strong all my life so when things like this happen part of me feels like I've lost the battle (...I'll never lose the war).

I'll be honest, afterwards I did feel a bit better, as you do when you cry, but I still felt pretty down in the dumps. I knew that it would take a week or so for me to put a positive spin on all of the negative thoughts, and that I'd need to confront the fears of what Matt thinks about it. I'm not saying that I think he'll be mad at me or anything, I just hate the thought of letting him down because all I've done since I've been at the club is try and earn his respect.

Blog Entry 8 - Renewed Happiness

I never expected my negativity to last long and it didn't. In the past when I've gone through a phase of worrying about the tumour it's only lasted a few days and then I return to my usual self. This time was different, it was literally the day after that I started to perk back up, much to my own surprise. I was waiting for it to suddenly hit me again about the set back with the date, to send me spiralling back into feeling sorry for myself, but it didn't happen. Within 2 days I was completely back to normal, happy as Larry. Don't get me wrong, I was still hugely disappointed and frustrated about the delay and the implications it has on my season and on the team, but I was finding the positives in every negative emotion that I thought of... well done mind. One of the positives to come out of the operation came to me like an epiphany on the way to one of the games. I know that I'll lose my hearing in one ear, and I won't lie, I'm really not looking forward to it. But you hear about your other senses improving because of it which could be a huge help. One of my good friends has been deaf since birth and I was talking to him about the implications of not being able to hear. He was explaining how 'normal hearing' people see in a relatively narrow field of vision because they can rely on their ears to alert them to things going on around them, but deaf people have a much wider range because it's the only way they can take in most of their surroundings. As a goalkeeper, a wider range of vision, or a better ability to see in a wider range would be a HUGE benefit, being aware of the players around you is a massive part. Woohoo! (...I also need to wear glasses sometimes so if that improves too it'll be an even bigger bonus).

The fact that I went from such a deep low, back to my relatively high got me really thinking about how I'd come to it and why my thoughts had changed so drastically. It was almost as though I wasn't thinking about myself, but doing a case study of someone else's thought processes. And as I've just written that now, it sounds really odd. My conclusions were that it could have gone one of two ways.

The first theory I had was that I'd had a lot of experiences in my life that had been setbacks or situations which weren't ideal and had built up my mental strength, meaning that I found it easier to get over it.

The second theory, and the one which I hope is wrong, is that because it's been delayed and isn't in the near future, I've buried it in my mind to worry about another day. I hope that isn't the case though, because that means I'll have to go through the feeling down and panicking phase all over again as the operation comes closer (and hopefully happens this time!!).

In the past I haven't had a definite date, it's always just been "around the beginning of May" or what not, but now I do have a date. I know in myself that I like to be in control of situations and like to know what's going on, so at least now with having a date to work towards it'll be easier to cope with.

Blog Entry 9 - Ending on a high!

I'm not at all planning on my career being over because of this operation, so I know that 'ending on a high' can seem like a dramatic title for this part, but I don't mean it in such a dramatic way.

We had our last game of the season before the break for the World Cup, and I'd planned to spend it with my parents and just generally relax before the last part of training leading up to the operation. With it being the last game it felt like a big thing for me. I'll miss not being around on match days like I normally would, and I'll definitely miss not being involved in the team. I thought that was pretty much it, that all I'd be doing from then until my operation was training with the players that weren't away at the World Cup. As much as I love training with the girls, it's not the same buzz you get from game days.

It was much to my surprise that I got a call from the England Women's senior goalkeeping coach, Lee Kendal, asking if I could come and help out at the camp before the World Cup because of injuries. I thought my time was up before my operation; there were no more games that I could have the chance to play in, and I wasn't going to any Under 23 camps where I could show how far I'd come in the past couple of years.

Of course I felt bad that one of the girls was injured, but it wasn't going to stop me from making the most of the experience and taking in as much as I could. Consider me a sponge for the time I was at the camp (and a bit of a sheep at first because I was just following people around not knowing what I was supposed to do. Baaa...).

So from thinking all I was doing was training, to then being with the seniors pre-World Cup; it doesn't really get any better than this. I believe in the saying 'everything happens for a reason' - as cringe and cliché as it sounds - because it's helping me to rationalise things that I've experienced before. So to have this chance felt right, and I felt like I'd worked hard enough to have earned it. I feel like a totally different person and player since the last time I was away with England. I just hope I can prove it to them and finish on a real high before my few months break.

Blog Entry 10 - Progress Report, back to reality.

Although I wasn't the first (or second) choice to get the call up for the England camp, that in no way stopped me from enjoying it and relishing the opportunity. In a way it probably helped me because I had no pressure on me, I wasn't really expected to do really well. I hadn't played all season and I'd never been on a senior camp before. That said, I had a GREAT time and to be honest I didn't want it to end. I actually had a football version of the holiday blues! The camp was really good, and it was a real privilege to be a part of the squad before they went off to the World Cup in Canada. I don't often say this, but I feel like I did myself proud, a total turnaround from how I'd left it after what I thought was my last game before the operation. It was good to test myself against at the level that I aspire to be at, and it's definitely given me some extra motivation to come back even stronger and fitter than I have ever been.

I've tried to be as honest as possible when I've been writing this. Not only to help other people going through similar things to relate to, but also to help me to be honest with myself through the whole process. I don't like being negative, but in order to be honest and talk about the reality of how I'm feeling I have to talk about the things that aren't so good.

The truth is, when I'm around other people I put on a front that I'm absolutely fine and up for the challenge. That isn't a lie at times because I am ready for the challenge, but at the same time I'm terrified. I've been feeling down a lot recently but I've tried my utmost to hide it from everyone else except when I'm on my own; in the shower, driving in the car, walking a dog. It's exhausting and I'm sure people can relate to that. To me, I feel like if I'm down all the time then the tumour is beating me, and I'm a very bad loser so I'm not letting that happen.

I don't think it's necessarily a bad thing that I put on a front and pretend everything is okay, I just feel like at some point in time it's going to catch up with me and my walls will crumble, probably along with myself. I hate the thought of that happening, it sounds so dramatic! But when I'm feeling down I feel so vulnerable to that scenario happening.

The main reason I try to hide it so much is because I don't want to be a mood drainer. The team is trying to prepare for a testing second half of the season, my friends have their own problems to deal with, and my parents have enough on their plate. It's good in the fact that it helps me to stay in a positive state of mind more than it does negative, and I am genuinely positive about it all, but every now and then all the parts of it that I'm trying not to think about come to the forefront of my thoughts. I was watching TV before bed and something was said about a brain injury after the patient was shot in the head (...it could be worse for me when I think of that!). All the doctor said was "walking across a room will feel like a marathon" which is what my surgeon and specialist nurse Andrea has said to me. That little reference stopped me sleeping all night, all I could think of was my operation, and not the positives about it either.

I don't like ending an entry on a negative note. So I'm going to tell you what I've planned to do to stop all this negativity, and for anyone that knows me probably won't be surprised at this. I'm going to write a list. A list of everything I'm worried about, and a list of the reasons why I shouldn't be worried, or why it's not necessarily a bad thing.

Blog Entry 11 - It's okay not to be okay

I decided to write this blog to help myself and to help other people. And now I'm finding myself torn between telling the truth and saying the things that would seem 'right' to say to someone going through a hard time. Like stay positive, it'll all be fine, you'll get through it (this is still true by the way). But I'm sat here in the middle of the night writing this because I can't sleep, all I can play through my head is how I'm going to say bye to my teammates and friends when I see them for the last time before the surgery. God knows what I'm going to say to my parents, I'm so worried and scared about how they're going to cope when I'm under. I keep replaying it in my head, no matter how much I try and plan what I'd do if I won the lottery... which is my usual 'go to' strategy when I'm trying to sleep.

I keep thinking about dying and I hate it. It's not the sort of thing I want to think about, not when I'm about to sleep. And it's not the sort of thing that other people about to go through this experience will want to read either, which is where I struggle between being honest and saying the 'right' thing. But I guess the truth is, this is the right thing. Saying the 'right' thing is what happens in films and TV when the script is set, but I have no idea what's going to happen to me or how well it's going to go, nobody knows how any operation will go, with anybody. We can hope and we can be told the chance of things going well and if things go wrong, as I'm going to have

major brain surgery, but we can never actually know what's going to happen. That's why it's so scary. It's unknown.

So to be honest, me worrying about whether or not I'm saying the types of things that would help other people is pointless. I need to be honest, because this journey isn't a TV show or a film; it's real life, with real people and no script or plan. I've realised that it's okay to be scared, it's okay to worry, and it's okay to have sleepless nights. At this moment in time that's the best advice I could give to someone. It's okay. It's not going to be easy, but that doesn't mean it's any less doable. Feeling like this is a natural process, all part of the journey. It just so happens that I'm trying to analyse what I'm going through at the same time to try and let people relate. And to let people relate means saying it how it is, not sugar coating it.

Another piece of advice that I've just come across... Writing your blog in the middle of the night when you can't sleep definitely tires you out and snaps you out of the negative loops you have going round and round in your head. Now I'm going to go to sleep and spend all of my virtual millions.... Goodnight.

Blog Entry 12 - The time has finally come!

It's here! It feels so strange, a part of me feels really excited but that's probably because it's been building up for so long and now it's finally happening. Once I've got the operation out of the way I can move on and have nothing hanging over me. All I'll have to deal with is getting my balance back and coming to terms with losing my hearing in one ear. That's something I'm dreading, but when I was stressing about it I just turned to google to look for other footballers who played with deafness. Luckily I come across a couple of players who had successful careers regardless of their hearing, so this put my mind to rest a lot.

In the week leading up to the operation I was worrying about how I was going to say goodbye to my teammates and friends. The truth is, it wasn't as bad as I expected. I think that was because I didn't want to focus too much on it. I didn't want to dwell on it because then I'd get emotional. It seemed to work. I only cried a little bit!

I'm actually feeling strangely okay at the minute, even though this time in 12 hours I'll be midway through the surgery. A massive part of why I'm feeling good (and yes, I do actually feel good) is because of the people I have around me. I literally have the most amazing family, friends and teammates. I value every single person in my life and collectively they've made me feel like I can conquer any challenge. To feel like that also makes me feel incredible lucky to have the honour of calling them my friends. All this strength and determination is for them, to prove to them that I will get through it and I won't let them down.

In a strange sort of way this tumour is a blessing. I know I've said it before but it feels more important to emphasise it now. Going through any type of hardship in your life allows you to see who really cares and who's there for you. To know so many people care for you is by far the best thing that I've felt for a long time and the fact that it's come about from this tumour is somewhat ironic!

Enough of the build-up and the emotional rollercoaster, the time has finally arrived and I'm 100% ready and good to go. My life with this brain tumour will come to an end, but my life without one will begin, and I'm determined to make it a life that my family will be proud of.

Blog Entry 13 - Post Op.

It finally came, after months of build-up, delays, more build-up and more delays, I had my tumour removed.

On the day of the operation I was relatively calm and upbeat, which I felt proud of myself for. I hoped I'd be like that but wasn't sure if my body would agree when the time came. I could see that my parents were terrified but I actually felt okay, I hope this helped them too. I think that this was the best way to be. Granted, you can't force yourself to be upbeat if you're scared of surgery (and don't get me wrong, part of me was scared), but I think that focusing on all the positives definitely made the whole thing easier. In part I think that was the plus side of all the delays and setbacks, it made me want to seize the moment before anything could happen to change the plans.

So off I go, being wheeled away in the bed down to the operating theatre chatting about the women's World Cup. Yet another success for the tournament, it gave me and the anaesthetist something to talk about, to pass the awkward silence as I was being wheeled away. I was laying there with nothing but an open backed hospital gown on and baggy paper knickers, so anything to talk about was a bonus!

I can't really use much humour to try and describe the first few days after the surgery. It was pretty tough and it's something I'd rather forget. In fact, I think my body agrees with me on that because I seem to have forgotten quite a bit of it until something triggers a memory, or my mum reminds me of something. The surgery lasted 10 hours. A very long time for my parents, a couple of seconds for me. Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday all morphed into one, I couldn't tell you what happened on which day, I was totally out of it. Speaking to my parents and the nurses afterwards I started to remember a few things. Being woken up every half an hour on the first night so they could check my eyes and that I still had control of my arms and legs was definitely not a highlight. I was really sick, had a massive headache, had a large pressure bandage wrapped around my head and was wired up to all sorts of machines. Probably three of the worst days of my life at the time, but I soon started to improve a lot, and now I feel like I don't remember it too much, which isn't a bad thing at all! Once they took the bandage off the opposite side of my face swelled up massively. My eye wouldn't open properly and I looked like I'd gone 2 rounds with Mike Tyson (I'd never last any more). It was hilarious to look at myself in the mirror. I was shocked at first because I genuinely didn't recognise myself. I found it funny, but I can't imagine my parents had the same feelings when their daughter looked like she'd been clobbered in the face with a bat. My right eye wasn't cooperating with what my left eye wanted to do either. It was looking in a slightly different direction, which give me double vision, and my eyelid blinked fractionally less than the other. Fortunately it didn't last long though and within a few days they were back to their normal selves. I'd fared pretty well considering all of the possible complications the consultants had warned me about.

I was in my own room for the first night (I think), and then I moved onto the ward with 4 beds where I met two absolutely lovely women; Audrey and Liz. Without those two my week (yes, I was

only in for a week) in hospital would have been a lot more difficult. I hope they read this at some point because I want them to know how much they really did help me. I was struggling with a headache that I couldn't shift and the medical team caring for me were a little concerned so they sent me for a CT scan, and warned me that I could need a lumbar puncture. If you don't know what that is, it's when they drain spinal fluid to ease the pressure on my brain because they thought it was causing my head pain. I'd heard bad stories from those sort of procedures that they were really painful, my dad had had a bad experience with one too. Audrey and Liz picked up on my worry because as soon as the consultants left they both got to work on reassuring me that times have changed and it wouldn't be as bad as I thought, and to be honest they really did make me feel calm.

We bonded over the week. If one of us got up to try and move around the other two would perk up and check that the other didn't need any help. We were always on red alert! Liz had been there for at least 3 weeks, and Audrey arrived on the Monday like I did, so Liz could get around relatively easily whereas me and Audrey started out like drunken babies. This was probably the best way to describe the way I was walking for the first couple of days. It was only by Thursday that I could make it the short trip across the ward. A very momentous occasion when I first completed the epic 4 metre journey on my own, although I was studied all the way by Audrey and Liz; nothing got past those two. Even if I thought I'd managed to do it without disturbing one of them (I swear I was stealth-like), Audrey always seemed to awaken with her customary "Are you alright, love?"

I felt very protective over them both. Audrey was a determined old soul and wanted to do everything herself, no matter how long it took. To her credit she did just that, she was very inspiring to me. Liz was a different case, her brain tumour had left her struggling to say what she wanted to say, even though she was aware of what words wanted to come out she just couldn't do it. This was particularly worse at meal times when we were asked what we wanted to eat, she wanted to say it herself but got so frustrated with it. Over the time that I was with her she improved massively and kept trying every time, something that was really uplifting to see.

Audrey was discharged on the Sunday, followed by me and Liz the day after, funnily enough at exactly the same time. Although Liz was being wheeled away before me and hadn't said goodbye so was shouting "stop! Wait a minute, stop!" It would have been quite funny to see from an outsider's perspective. All three of us cried when we said goodbye. I know that might seem a bit dramatic when you've only known someone a week but we'd been through a lot together in that short space of time. Liz was able to have more conversations, me and Audrey could walk again, we'd crossed bridges that most people would deem as mundane and meaningless, but to us three they were massive obstacles and we'd witnessed each other come through it.

The reason I've written so much about my time with the both of them was because I learnt so much and felt like I'd come so far with the help of them both. There wasn't one point when either of them complained, and in turn neither did I. We all just got on with it and tried to work through things as we were told to, and we did just that. In such a short space of time I learnt a lot from them both and I hope I helped them in some part too. They helped me during one of my most vulnerable moments and I'm so thankful to them for that. I hope that our paths cross in the future and I can meet them again.

Oh, and to finish off the story about the lumbar puncture, it turned out I didn't need one after all. They did find a blood clot in one of the vessels in my head but that just required daily injections and a drug to thin my blood. So all in all it was a good result!

Blog Entry 14 - How things change...

I figured that people might be interested in what it was like after my op, especially if you are about to have a similar surgery yourself.

The first few days weren't pleasant, but then again nobody feels spritely after any operation. I struggled to eat for at least 10 days, managing more than 2 spoonsful of cornflakes in the morning was an achievement. Audrey and Liz were proud. They were always keeping tabs on how much I was eating. I was constantly feeling sick and dizzy when I sat up, not exactly the feelings you'd like when you're about to tuck into hospital food.

Another strange thing that happened was my change in food tastes. I don't mean that milk tasted like ketchup or anything, just that things I'd loved eating before didn't seem very appetising all of a sudden. Nothing highlighted this more than my prior love of Soreen malt loaf. I could eat a whole loaf in a couple of days before my op, but afterwards, I just can't stomach it. This is very disappointing because I know how much I love it, but my body just doesn't agree. I hope this doesn't mean that my senses have adjusted to my loss of hearing by changing my taste buds... but then again if it does, I might start liking foods I never considered before. I also had a massive craving for Rice Crispies, I had them every day for the first week I was back home (and for breakfast today). Snap, Crackle and Pop were probably the main contributor to my energy levels.

Food tasted really salty as well, another strange development. I'm not a lover of salt anyway, but literally everything tasted salty even if it just had the slightest pinch in it. I thought I was just readjusting to food again, but then I discovered that I could smell and taste the chemicals in tap water. I don't know if any of my senses could have changed this fast, so maybe it's partly psychological, but regardless of whether it is or not, it's like I'm discovering things I didn't even consider beforehand.

In hospital I was pretty dizzy for a big percentage of the time. I was okay when I was laying down, but when I sat up it took it out of me and I felt a little rough after a while. This together with double vision, tiredness and a headache made the whole thing pretty uncomfortable. I know that this might not be exactly what you're wanting to hear if you're pre-surgery, but at least it won't come as much of a shock to you. Everything the consultants and nurses said to me were true - that was quite reassuring. It was reassuring because as well as all of the side effects and illness they'd warned me about, they also told me that I'd bounce back relatively quickly, and looking back over these past 10 days I've done just that. It's pretty crazy when I consider how fast things have actually moved along.

Monday 6th: 10 hour operation.

Tuesday 7th: Bed bound, zombified. Apparently required nurses' assistance to roll over.

Wednesday 8th: Still bed bound and zombified. Progressed to blinking and hand squeezing.

Thursday 9th: Actually sat up and talking*! (*for small amounts of time followed by frequent sleeps). Walked to the toilet with the aid of nurses. Bandage came off, followed by my face swelling until I didn't even recognise myself in the mirror.

10th: Walked to the toilet on my own. Held a conversation with visitors and actually left the ward to the cafe, albeit in a wheelchair.

Saturday 11th: Walked a little further, without a wheelchair.

Sunday 12th: Able to walk up and down on the ward easily, watched the girls win their first game back after the World Cup break. A proud day.

Monday 13th: Home time! The 29 staples were taken out of my head and then I was free.

Tuesday 14th: Pretty rough day which I'd rather forget about. Took some time to adjust to being at home. Walking feels a lot easier now.

Wednesday 15th: Took a trip to the supermarket with the aid of a wheelchair.

Thursday 16th: Managed to walk around a lake close to my house, and play throw and catch in the garden (although it left me with a headache).

Friday 17th: Walked ON MY OWN from my parents' house to my mum's business. Not the longest of distances but still a milestone nonetheless. To watch me I'm pretty sure I looked a little drunk. Also, managed a bit of DIY (very successfully even if I do say so myself)

Saturday 18th: Travelled back down to Liverpool to watch the team play against Notts County. 80% of the time I could walk on my own, 20% of the time I needed a guide to keep me walking in a straight line.

Sunday 19th: Rest day, kind of. I can't stay in the house for a whole day, so a trip to the shops and visiting family was in order. Walking becoming a lot easier.

Monday 20th: Another weekly trip to the hospital to have my bloods checked, together with a trip walking (slowly) around the shops, trying Costa again (which tasted strange) and picking up a friend's dog to keep me company for the next few days. Busy day.

Considering it was only 2 weeks since I had brain surgery I still felt like I'd come a long way. I can't emphasize enough the importance of being fit, healthy and positive before an operation. I genuinely believe that it's helped me so much in getting over it so quickly. It helps you cope with the mental side of surgery and makes any setbacks easier to deal with. I'm sure there's a physiological element to positivity too, but I'm afraid you'll just have to turn to Google to find that out.

I know there's still a long way to go, and I'm aware that the hardest part is going to be when I feel like I can do more than I'm allowed to do. But, I've been through the same situation before when I ruptured my ACL so in a way it's a good thing that that happened too. It's given me experience of having to hold myself back from doing what I feel like I'm ready to do when people who are a hell of a lot more qualified than me tell me I can't.

Blog Entry 15 - Reunited.

I wanted to write about how brilliant it felt to be see my teammates again after the operation. It was 12 days after my operation when I had the chance to go back down to Liverpool to watch the girls playing in the league. I can't tell you how excited I was. I couldn't sleep for the days leading up to it. I felt like a kid at Christmas. I'd massively underestimated how much I'd miss them and miss

being around them all. I knew I'd miss them, because I spend more time with my teammates than I do with anyone else, I just didn't know that I'd miss them this much.

When I arrived at the stadium and made it to the changing room door, I couldn't wait to get in. I could hear the music blaring (I was a little bit worried about how my one ear would cope, but it was fine) and the usual sounds of the team getting ready to warm up. The welcome I got from everyone was more than I could have hoped for, but exactly what I should have expected knowing how amazing everyone who's part of the football club is. I was so pleased to be able to see them before they went out, although I was cautious not to disrupt their match day. I didn't get chance to see the Goalkeeping Union (consisting of Libby Stout, Joe Potts and Rach Darbyshire) because they went out early. But as soon as they spotted me on the pitch I was reunited at last. Embraces all around. Man, I love this team.

The reception I got from the supporters was really touching too, from the card they gave me to the chanting of my name. I couldn't ask to be part of a better club. Every person seemed to know what had happened and wished me well, including the stewards at the stadium. All of this was surprising. I didn't realise so many people would be aware, but it was heartwarming to say the least. All the walking and talking I was doing was exhausting me, but the well wishes and kind words people were giving me kept me going. Regardless of how I was feeling inside (which was very tired and pretty ill), you couldn't take the smile off my face because being in that environment was exactly where I wanted to be.

It's important to me that I don't understate how lucky I am compared to other people going through the same journey as I am. Having so many people supporting me from all of the country and all over the world is insane, and to be honest I feel a little bit unworthy when there are other people who need the support too. I have an amazing network of family and friends that I've grown up with, and to have them supporting me was fantastic in itself, but that together with the support I've had through football is truly overwhelming. Without wanting to jinx anything, I haven't had any days where I've felt really down and low, which initially I was expecting to happen and I know was a major worry for my parents. I genuinely believe that it's thanks to the people I have around me from family, friends and football that I've been able to stay so positive both before during and after my operation. I don't know how to thank them enough, or to let them know how much they've helped other than to come back from this stronger than ever and be as successful as I can be.

Blog Entry 16 - Meeting People in the Same Boat.

Although an Acoustic Neuroma is a fairly rare condition, since first discovering mine I've come across quite a few people who have had the tumour too. Some by pure coincidence (which was very strange), some after they contacted me once it was released in the media about my operation. Others contacted me about having a brain tumour, although not exactly the same. It was all very heartwarming to have the support of strangers, people who I have never spoken to before taking time to send me their well wishes, and in some cases asking for advice. Unfortunately for them, their symptoms and after-effects seemed more serious and life changing than mine. Although some of them were short-term effects, I still considered them serious and the period of time that they had it was still a period that I was very lucky not to have to go through.

Something which I'm very aware of every day when I see how well I'm doing compared to the majority who go through the same surgery.

There are three people that will always be stuck in my mind, all for very different reasons. The first is someone who contacted me on Facebook telling me how she was going through a similar brain surgery, which turned out to be exactly a week after my own. In the week after mine we exchanged a few messages on Facebook talking about the recovery after the operation. She was understandably nervous, and we shared quite a few similarities in how we were dealing with the situations, mainly the fact that neither of us wanted to be a burden on our friends and family. We both played football, pretty much the same age, and both had a few mutual friends. Small world. I hope I helped her in some way, but I never did ask. It's like asking her to rate how good my advice was... "On a scale of 1-10, please rate how much my wise words have helped you..." Unlike my tumour, and although it was all removed, tests showed that her tumour was cancerous (not an acoustic neuroma), and so she had to go through a treatment of chemotherapy. I was gutted to hear the news. I hoped that our journeys would follow the same path and that we would both recover successfully at the same time, but it wasn't to be. She seemed relatively positive, whether or not she meant it or not I don't know, but I hope so. I strongly believe that it's the best way to be if you can manage to. I'm confident that she can overcome it though.

The second meeting happened by the strangest of coincidences. The owner of a local café in Chorley, Leanne, had previously been through a brain operation when she was 26 (I wouldn't like to say how long ago that was), so that in itself was rather coincidental. Her recovery seemed worst and more long-winded than mine was, although she did emphasise how bad she thought my recovery would be, which wasn't necessarily what I wanted to hear. On the plus side, it was a pleasant surprise when I turned out better than she had predicted (I knew I would). However, 3 weeks after my operation I took my mum out for brunch to celebrate being up and about. As we arrived, Leanne 'secretly' (it wasn't very subtle) told me about a woman sitting in the back on her own who was 8 months post-surgery for the same condition, and that she thought we should talk. It all felt very top secret. After a few awkward glances and smiles she had finished her meal and got up to leave... hopefully it wasn't because of the ginger girl who kept looking over and smiling at her... Leanne stopped her before she left and directed her to our table. Obviously I'd failed in my mission to go and make the first move. The conversation turned out to be quite eye-opening, if at some times repetitive as we both struggled to hear things at times. It turned out she was suffering more with facial weakness and still suffered a little bit from fatigue, neither of which I plan on having for a significant amount of time and it seems to be working out so far. On the down side, she was a lot more negative in her mindset than I was but I guess that's understandable for someone who suffered a pretty bad side-effect. I for one would hate to have facial palsy and would probably struggle to be as positive as I am all of the time, although I'd like to think I wouldn't let it affect me too much. Sometime I struggle when I speak to people who are being negative, it's a mindset and a trait that I find frustrating. Having experienced a lot of that negativity from my dad due to his daily illness I am more understanding of it now, and after trying to put myself in their shoes I can see their point of view. It can go one of two ways, they can either bring you down and allow you to think badly, or it can make you realise it's not the ideal way to be thinking about life. Thankfully, the latter applied to me and I tried to put a positive spin or comment on everything she was saying about things. Both of us seemed to enjoy speaking so someone who totally understood what each was going through. It was comforting. The progress she had made was brilliant considering her time frame. I hope that she's still doing well, if not better than she was before.

Andrea, my specialist nurse, had asked me if I could offer some advice to someone else who was struggling to come to terms with the surgery. As helping people is something that strongly want to do, I jumped at the chance. I have no idea who it is, what stage they're at, or their circumstances. It feels exciting to have the chance to hear and learn about the journey someone else is having and compare it with my own. Watch this space.

Hearing about how much progress I've already made compared to other people has also made me feel pretty guilty though. I feel that because of football and the media attention I had, I'm getting more attention than I should be compared to the people who have had a much tougher time than me. It's been far from easy but it seems nothing compared to other people, I feel guilty for being in people's thoughts and prayers when there are other people that need it more. I struggled to explain how I felt about it, but when I managed to make some sort of sense of it to my mum she came back to me with a very valid point. That I was in a privileged position to be able to promote the condition and be able to spread something good to people who feel like they can relate to me, and she's right. I'm in a position to be able to do good, and that makes me feel very lucky and motivated to do so. After all, I think I've discovered that making the most of the situation in a positive way is the best way for me to personally get through it the way that I am.

Blog Entry 16 - Feeling Happy?

I don't really know why, but I feel pretty happy with life right now. Yes I might be partially deaf, yes I might not be able to play football, and yes I might not be able to do the things I could easily do before, but I feel happy. To be honest, part of me feels like I shouldn't be but I'm not complaining and I'm making the most of it.

Okay, so in the thinking time I had before writing this sentence I may have figured out why, maybe. The first thing is probably the rate at which I seem to have improved so far (5 weeks later), I'm driving now, I can do more at training, and I have some independence back. Doing food shopping no longer requires a wheelchair. I'd set myself goals and challenged myself to recovering faster than people had predicted. One of my worries was that I wasn't going to be able to reach them if my body didn't let me, no matter how much I wanted to. But that hasn't happened, things have gone as well as I'd hoped, if not better. I also worried a lot about how my eating disorder would play a part.

Being idle for at least 4 weeks was something that petrified me, knowing how I felt after my ACL operation, but again, that has worked out better than I could have ever believed. I even managed to enjoy a packet of Minstrels when I was in hospital (other chocolate brands are available... Maltesers are highly recommended too). I lost a bit of weight when I was in hospital, after all I didn't eat properly for at least 10 days afterwards. I won't lie, it didn't bother me in the slightest. It made me happy and meant I wasn't as strict with myself as I usually am, I enjoyed things more and didn't have the instant feeling of guilt after I'd eaten something 'un-healthy.' That doesn't mean my eating disorder didn't bother me at all. There have certainly been times this past month when it has bothered me and made me go into list-mode and plan what I would eat the next day, but on the whole it's gone a heck of a lot better than I anticipated. I haven't eaten as much as I would normally eat, but as much as I've not needed the calories, I've not really craved them as much either. The fact that the eating hasn't been too much of an issue after being so anxious about it was a huge weight off my mind, and my parents.

Although my energy levels have improved massively in the past few weeks, my body definitely tells me when I've done too much. The term "listen to your body" has never been more apt. There was a day at training when I had done more than I had since leaving hospital, a light bike session, doing odd jobs at training and attending the team meeting well and truly wiped me out. The next day I had to stay at home, my energy levels were really low and I was a lot more wobbly than usually. There were a few close encounters with objects on that day, and I nearly fell out of the shower. Both of which humoured me. I was quite pleased with myself for being sensible too, to be honest. Well done, me.

Blog Entry 17 - Partial Deafness.

Before my operation I was really quite worried about being deaf, there was something about losing one of my senses that panicked me, although I tried my best not to think about it. As soon as I'd come around a bit after the surgery I soon realised that it wasn't going to be that bad, there are far worse problems that I could have had. I haven't yet had a cold though, so I'm not sure how nice it'll be when my good ear is blocked up too, but I guess I'll have to wait and see for that part.

Obviously I'd rather have full hearing, but I have discovered quite a few pros to being partially deaf...

1. Sleeping rolled over on your good ear makes it very peaceful.
2. Laying on your deaf ear while watching TV makes no difference to the sound (unlike the roaring noise you get when you can hear)
3. Selective hearing when someone is speaking to you, you can pretend you haven't heard them (although 9/10 times I don't actually hear them)
4. Being in a loud environment and putting on finger in your ear solves the problem really well.
5. ...and leaves you with a free hand too.
6. It's entertaining to play with my deaf ear, it's almost like it's numb because I can't hear anything.
7. If you break one headphone, it's not a big deal because you only need one anyway.
8. To be continued... I'm sure I'll come across a good deal more.

There are also some odd elements to being deaf, which I've experienced so far...

1. It's difficult to locate where a noise is coming from, which leaves you spinning around in circles at times if someone has shouted your name.
2. If someone is standing and talking on my deaf side they have to shout or prod me to get my attention.

3. People whispering to me in my deaf ear without realising. This has happened a few times already and is still just as funny.
4. Also to be continued...

So far I've found more pros than cons to the loss of hearing, and after thinking it was going to be one of the worst side effects I've been more than pleasantly surprised.

Blog Entry 18 - Building Back into Training.

Less than five weeks after my surgery I was already back on a bike and busying myself around at training. I felt that although keeping myself busy was tiring me out, it was also helping to rebuild my balance and get me used to how my body was feeling afterwards. I can definitely feel the difference, looking back at the first 2 weeks after coming home I can tell how much better I am now.

I know that football has priceless throughout this whole process; my fitness level before my operation, the support from players and fans, the training plan from the club, and having a target of when I can return to playing. All of these have helped me both mentally and physically.

This past week (5 weeks post op) I've properly started my rehab programme, and it feels SO good to be officially building myself back up. It started with really basic, but it was never going to be a quick fix getting myself back. I was prepared for that. I think being mentally prepared has put me in the right mindset already, and I'm more than determined to come back stronger. That's been reiterated by my goalkeeping coach, the sports scientist and the physio. All of us want to develop me into a goalkeeper who is stronger and fitter than ever, almost like a blank canvas. I'm ready for whatever they tell me to do, I trust them 100%. It's exactly what I had planned in my mind beforehand, so to know that we're all on the same page is great.

Mentally I'm in a place that in all honesty I didn't expect to be in.

Blog Entry 19 - Meeting Nicola.

Since the beginning I'd said that I wanted to help someone, and making it my mission to do that has helped me to remain positive too, so I'd set a good example to other people. Helping at least one person in any way was something I'd be so pleased about, and I'd look back on and be proud. This was my chance.

After a few (very) long text messages sent between each other we decided it was better to meet up so she could interrogate me in person, and I could give better answers. I thought it would be good to see how I was doing in person too. It's all very well telling her how well my scar is healing, and how my hair being shaved looked, but seeing it in person puts things into a better perspective. I knew she wouldn't have believed me fully otherwise.

I don't want to disclose too much about Nic, I'm not sure if she'd want me to. But she's a young woman with a little girl who was very, very cute. Her job required lots of driving and one of her biggest fears was not being able to work, and how her daughter would cope with her in hospital.

Neither of these were issues for me in the build up to my operation because my situation with football was different, so obviously I couldn't directly relate but at the same time I wanted to reassure her that a lot of her fears were irrational and she didn't need to worry as much as she was. It's definitely easier said than done, and it's even easier for me to be saying it after I've been through it all. I hope I did a good job in reassuring her, she seemed like such an incredibly strong person during my time with her.

Having responsibilities is a good and a bad thing. It's bad because it's an added issue to cover for during your recovery, but on the other hand it's a really good this to distract you and keep you occupied in the build-up. Time can drag when you have time to yourself to contemplate what's to come.

We spent a good couple of hours sat in Starbucks, and it would have gone on even longer if I didn't have to leave for a game. There's so much to talk about when it comes to ANs, even I didn't realise how much there was. This was highlighted when, after about an hour and a half of questioning, Nic came out with "I feel like I've not even scratched the surface with what I wanted to ask you." I'm not sure if I chuckled out loud or not, but I did inside. Throughout the whole time Nicola's daughter contently sat playing and entertaining herself. I won't lie, I'm not very experienced with children (more so with dogs), but in my opinion she would manage really well when her mum was in hospital.

Speaking to Nic put things into perspective for me, and it felt good to talk about things too. On the negative side it made me feel like I'd had it too easy. I didn't really have any bad side effects after the operation, and my symptoms beforehand weren't as bad as I've heard some others had experienced. So as much as I wanted to tell Nicola it would all be okay, I had no way of knowing if that would be the case. There's no real way of controlling anything to do with the operation of the pre and post op symptoms, only your mindset and physical condition. She was already fit so that wasn't an issue, so then focusing on a positive mindset was the most important thing I wanted to get across (I know I probably sound like a broken record, but it's true!) Telling someone to have a positive mindset can easily be patronising and it's definitely easier said than done, but I can't emphasise enough how much it can make a difference. To this day, it's still helping me.

When I try and give advice or encouragement to anyone else, be it brain tumour, sports injury or whatever, it seems to re-inspire me. It's not that I lose inspiration, but sometimes when a journey is long you lose sight of the end and it can seem never-ending and tedious. But talking to other people makes me think 'well I can't be telling them to keep strong and patient if I'm not doing it too.' Being a hypocrite is one of my pet peeves, so I don't want to become one myself. I feel a lot of pride in knowing that I've got the ability to provide a positive story to other people in the same boat, starting with Nicola. To me, I've already accomplished what I set out to do, to help somebody else in my situation, and I feel like I've made a friend in the process. But I don't want to stop there. I can feel that there is so much more to come, and hopefully so many more people can be reached and influenced in a positive way.

Blog Entry 20 - Post Op Consultation with Professor King.

Throughout all the build-up to my operation I was always under the impression that the surgery would be carried out by someone else, but on the day I discovered it would be Professor King and Professor Simon Lloyd. Hearing that he was a Professor was no problem for me at all, if you've

made to that level you must be pretty good at what you do. I don't know why it changed, but as the operation was a success I'm pretty glad it did. On a side note, a friend bought me a Build-a-Bear after my operation. In honour of Professor King I've decided to name the bear 'Kingly', I'm sure he'll be honoured. I've never named a teddy after anyone before...

He came to see me after the op, not that I remember though. Although when I did meet him properly his face did look familiar so I'm sure I had met him before. At the follow up appointment there was only Prof. King, myself (obviously) and another new member of his team who was being shown the ropes. As I walked in he introduced me as a 'famous' football player, which was nice to hear, although I didn't quite agree. He told me quite a funny story.. well I found it funny anyway. After he'd gone home for the night after casually spending 10 hours conducting brain surgery his daughters were telling him how they'd seen a news story about a female footballer who had just had an AN removed, which they thought he would be interested in as that's what he spends his time doing. His response was a simple "oh, really?" A couple of days later he realised that his daughters were referring to me, and he was in fact the person who had carried out the surgery. So he went and informed his daughters, "Darling, it was me." The story really tickled me. His daughters had found me on Twitter and told him I'd been tweeting some positive things, and I'm sure this would have pleased him. I hope it did anyway.

After a few questions about how my recovery had been he was made up with my progress, announcing "I think you're cured!" Music to my ears! Well, just the one ear. I'd written earlier about how I'd felt in the few days after my operation, and in hindsight I was a lot worse than I thought because it sparked some concern from the surgical team that had looked after me. I didn't realise this until the follow up. The way I looked had them worried, which was why they had sent me for the CT scan initially just as a precaution. It goes to show that even if the first few days of the recovery don't go to plan, it doesn't necessarily mean that your recovery will be longer or more difficult. So don't be disheartened if things don't go exactly to plan, hang in there.

I'd also been quite worried about my blood clot, but Prof. King reassured me about this too. There was even a debate about whether or not to continue my warfarin, as stopping the medication would mean I could return to full contact training earlier. In the end, we both decided that I would stay on the tablets. I felt the risk of something bad happening was very, very slim, but the bad things happening could be very, very bad. I'm sure my parents would thank me for going down the sensible route too. All in all, the consultation was going better than planned. The next step is just to have a CT scan to look at the clot in a few weeks, then scan for the tumour 1 year on, followed by a scan in 5 years. Other than some scar tissue he doesn't expect there to be anything significant, and my recovery and return of balance is just a matter of time. If my job wasn't football I'd already be back going about my business without any problems, as it happens I just have to wait a bit longer to be throwing myself on the ground again.

As I was leaving I thanked him for everything he had done, and on behalf of my parents because he's saved my life and given me a better one at the same time. This tumour has definitely changed me for the better, I feel more focused, more driven, and more determined than ever.

Thank you, Professor King. Thank you.

Blog Entry 21 - Back into training.

This was my first real week back in training. Week 6 post operation. The plan for the week's fitness was split into individual sessions that I could choose to do when I felt able consisting of reactive boxing, weights, rowing, biking, and pitch jogging.

The pitch session was the first time I'd ran since, and it was actually quite funny. For the first few steps I felt like I had all the energy in the world because I was so excited to be doing it again, but that soon changed as my legs felt like they had weights strapped to them. Running again was hard. I still felt pretty drunk too (obviously not literally drunk), it took a lot of concentration to run in a straight line, which didn't always work either. There was one point where I was running along the touchline but it looked like it was full of divots. In my mind I knew it was flat, but my eyes were telling me something different. In the end I decided to stop and check it with my foot. Unsurprisingly my eyes were wrong and it was indeed flat.

I do feel like my mindset has changed since I've started to get back into exercising again, I don't give up as easily. Not that I'd quit when things got tough before, but I feel like I can push through to a different level than I could before. With me being idle for so long I've lost a lot of fitness, I get out of breath really quickly and my lungs and muscles feel like they're screaming at me. I know it'll take a while to build it back up, my degree taught me all about that, but this new level of determination will hopefully pull me through the times when I inevitably get frustrated with my progress.

Up to now my anxiety about eating hadn't been as much of a problem as I thought it was going to be. If I did start to have issues with it I go into planning mode, scheduling what and when I'd eat. Even if I didn't follow it strictly the fact that I'd put a plan in place gives me some comfort. There have been days where it's got to me more recently though, but I usually promise myself a gym session in the morning before breakfast. My levels of fatigue have still been quite high and I still get tired easily, so there was one morning where I had to cancel my plans of visiting the gym due to the fact that I nearly fainted as I was standing up. As soon as this was decided I realised that I had a battle on my hands for the day to stop myself spiralling into worrying about it. It's the first time that it's really felt like it's been coming back, and I hate it. It's bad enough with the fatigue of my operation, but even stressing about eating is exhausting in itself. It's like a constant battle inside my head, and I annoy myself because I know that it's irrational. I think the main reason that it's started to resurface is because I'm trying to adjust the new balance of food that I'm eating as I start to do more exercise. I hope that as I get more used to it things will settle down again, but for now I'm having almost daily battles with the devil in my head trying to cause trouble.

There are times in training when I realise how hard it's going to be, and a big part of me is dreading it. I know there are people out there who thrive off running until they feel sick, but unfortunately I'm not one of them. That doesn't mean I'm not willing to push myself to my limits, it's just that I don't particularly enjoy doing it. The feeling after you've done it isn't too bad though. In the midst of all this we had the Champions League draw and beforehand I'd said how much I'd love to travel to Italy. It's one place I haven't had the chance to go to, but has always been on my bucket list. Lo and behold we were drawn the Italian team. Who'd have thought it? From that moment on my sole focus was on doing all I could to get myself fit for that game. It was definitely touch and go, the date of the fixture (October 7/8th) is right on the limit of me being able to play. To be honest the chances are limited but it's not stopping me aiming for it.

I'm finding myself getting stressed and frustrated when I can't do things like I did before, and I care a lot about how people perceive me (when I know I shouldn't). Along with my competitive side, to look so bad at doing things makes me feel pretty low, though I try to hide it. It's a bit like my eating, I care about how I look and what people think when they look at me. That being said, when I'm struggling I'm getting better at looking at the bigger picture and having the Champions League coming up is definitely helping me to refocus when I start to lose sight of where I want to be. I know it'll be a long process, but I'm an impatient person!

Blog Entry 22 - Recap!

When I've been writing this blog I've had to keep reminding myself why I'm doing this, and what are the important things to write about. So, to stop people getting bored with me just talking about football all the time I thought I would recap how I'm doing in relation to my AN surgery and post-op progress.

As I've said before, the main issue with the surgery was my hearing loss, more so because it's for life and not just a temporary side effect. There have been times where it's been an inconvenience but it's nothing more than that. I've been getting used to it a lot more, and now when I'm in loud environments I focus on what I want to listen rather than trying to take it all in. There's no secret why I've done this, it's just happened as I've put myself in those situations. I feel like it could have been easy to shy away from situations that meant I would struggle to hear but I feel that's no way to live your life. I purposely tried to push myself out of my comfort zone early on to get over any uncomfortable feelings I might have had. So far so good. I'm used to it already and sounds don't feel as strange when I'm only hearing it on one side anymore. That might be my brain adjusting, or it might be me not noticing the change anymore. Either way it's not a problem, or an inconvenience. Music still sounds as good as it does with one ear. My tinnitus is still there, but with that being a phantom effect I'm not sure if it will go. I do seem to pay less attention to it, but I guess it's just one of those things.

The tiredness has got a lot better too, to the point where I keep forgetting I should still probably be taking it a little easy. It's the end of August now, and I had my surgery on the 6th of July, and it seems like so long since it all happened. I only really noticed that my tiredness had improved when I looked back on how I was weeks ago, which included falling asleep as I was doing some exercises at training. It wasn't like I fell asleep mid-squat, but I was resting between sit up sets, eventually 'resting my eyes for 10 seconds.' Next thing I knew I was waking up just before I had to do a session. Who'd have thought the floor would be so comfortable! It's not like I wouldn't have been able to function had I not had a super power-nap. If I was out and about then it wouldn't have been an issue. I'm sure that if I had a normal career then I would be fine to go about my business without falling asleep on the job. I haven't done anything to help my tiredness, there's not much you can do to help it. All I've done is try to listen to my body and if I'm tired I take it easier. I found this pretty difficult though if I'm honest because when you're developing your fitness you need to push yourself to reap the rewards. It's been a careful balancing act so far, and I haven't always got it right. Slowly I'm learning the cues that I need to look out for but judging my training load to build fitness and my tiredness coming from my recovery has been pretty difficult. Although it must have worked out okay so far because looking back I've improved a lot to how I first started.

My balance is a lot better too, unless I'm tired and then it creeps up on me. My housemates have noticed this most, especially at night when we've got in from training. My 'drunken' stumbles always seem to amuse them (and me). It's not 100% yet, but I'm working on it. Sometimes I have to stabilise myself if I go off balance, but that's about it. Weights have been added to my training programmes for a few weeks now, although because of my lack of complete balance they've only started with resistance machines. I struggle to lift weights and balance at the same time, my brain has struggled to do that aspect of multitasking as of yet. I've been doing a lot of practice on wobble boards at training too, and doing simple things like picking items up of the floor. Anything I find I struggle with turns into a challenge and the more I do it, the better my balance gets. That's not some method that I've come up with myself, it's what the hospital told me to do and so far it's worked. Listen to what they say.

There is something strange that keeps happening though. At first I put it down to just being a one off but as it keeps happening more and more I think it might be related. Sometimes objects seem closer than they are and it makes me flinch or move out of the way (move out of the way of literally nothing that will touch me that is). For instance, I was running and someone rode past me on a bike, the shadow of their bike made me feel like it was going to hit me, and so I stumbled. Obviously the bike was never going to hit me, but try telling my eyes that. If people are reaching across in front of my face it feels like they're going to hit me. This happened with my grandma, and of course she wasn't going to punch me but I took evasive action and dodged her anyway. Whether this has anything to do with my tumour I don't know, but I never experienced it before my surgery.

Driving and other everyday tasks are fine, and anything I do struggle with I'm learning to give myself a break. Sometimes I get annoyed at my body for not doing what my brain wants me to do, but having come through a serious injury in the past I know that it won't all happen at once. That doesn't mean it's easy for me to be patient, it just means that it's easier to talk myself around when I do get frustrated. I've been through something before and come out the other end stronger. I'm determined to do the same this time.

Blog Entry 23 - No rest for the wicked!

Okay, so back to talking about football, but after recapping the main reason why I'm writing this I'll try and focus more on that from now on.

Midway through my recovery we went on a family break to Poole. I know what you're thinking, "oh it's an easy life for some!" I'm aware that I'm very fortunate to be able to do things like that, but due to the constant change of operation date we hadn't had chance to go away as a family, and it's something we've done every year. We want to make the most of all the time we have because you never know what's around the corner. As I couldn't fly we decided to stay in England, and what a good decision that was because Poole is stunning. I did feel guilty for being away from the team though. I felt like I was letting them down, but I'm sure they'll forgive me.

There was no week off from my rehab though, just a change of scenery instead. As they say, a change is as good as a rest. My training programme for this week (30th August - 6th September) was a big step up from what I was doing before in terms of running. I had 4 sessions to do including running, a circuit and skipping. I've found the running really hard, and as much as I feel like I've been running fast I'm pretty sure I still look like I'm running through tar, and my legs feel

the same way. I've struggled to run for any length of time without stopping or slowing down significantly. My running sessions are timed intervals so I know how long I need to be running before I can rest. Although it feels really difficult to maintain my speed for the duration I've realised that my determination is stronger than it was before, even if I slow down I don't stop until the time is up. I guess this is a pretty big positive but at the time I can only see the fact that I'm running slowly, and to do it in public is not something I like to do. It's not as though they know that I'm building myself back up, they just see me running slow and looking unfit. This is something that I really dislike about myself at the minute.

Although the sessions this week were really difficult I still managed to do them to the best of my ability, as well as thoroughly enjoy the break away. Big pat on the back for me! HOWEVER. I have learnt a valuable lesson this week in that I need to improve the whole 'listening to my body' element. Completing all the sessions as I did this week have led to an over training injury which has set back my recovery by another week, making my return for the Champions League game even more unlikely. When I realised what I'd done I started to panic and get upset. The week after my holiday was the week that I was supposed to be returning to some sort of goalkeeping training, and I was unbelievably excited to rejoin them. This was the first real set back that I'd faced though, it had been relatively plain sailing so far, which I was thankful for anyway. It took me a day or so to get my head in the right place again, and even writing this down here helped me a lot. I felt like I was mentally preparing and have already made one of my lists in my head about why there's no point worrying too much. For instance, I'm injured anyway and there is no pressure for me to make it back in time for the Champions League. That was just me challenging myself.

After several pep talks from people, and giving myself self-therapy (turns out I'm quite good at that), I've made my inner self understand that it's only a minor set-back and there's still the second round of the Champions League. So no pressure to get through girls, but I want to play in the second round. I guess I just miss training so much, and after being around them for a few weeks now without being able to join in I wanted to progress to the next stage really badly. After speaking to Libby (the other goalkeeper) I realised that I was probably going to keep having these little injuries as I come back because my body had been rested for so long. I think I always knew this was a possibility, I just didn't want to believe it. Now I don't have a choice but to face it, and now I'm more prepared to battle any other challenges that I come across in my return to playing. As I've said before, it's difficult to know what's too much because to anyone else it wouldn't seem a high workload but to my body it is, to my mind it isn't. I think this is one of the things that I'll have to work on throughout my recovery because as I get fitter the intensity will change, and I'll always have to revisit how much I should be realistically doing. I'm more switched on to looking for the signs of an over-training injury, and unlike I did in Poole, I won't try and work through it this time.

Blog Entry 24 - Harsh Reality.

Once I started running after my hip injury it was so disheartening. I felt like I looked so slow, I felt heavy, and I struggled to push myself through it. I could see myself in reflections and it made me feel horrible. The feeling after you've been for a run should be good, endorphins should be flowing and you should feel good for doing it. But that wasn't the case this time, I felt like crying.

My mum had feared this moment would come, when my mind wanted to do more than my body was letting me. One thing after another was making my mood plummet. The thought of people watching me run like that made me feel embarrassed, I'd hate people to look at me and think "wow she's running slowly." I used to really enjoy running, I felt proud of the fact I was running strong, but now I feel slow and heavy. It's not so bad when I'm at training with the girls, they know what I've been through so they'll understand, but other people will have no idea.

I hate the fact that I'm not as good at things as I was before, even though I knew that I was never going to be, I feel slow at everything. When I was on the Batak board (a series of lights that test your reaction time when you hit the ones that are lit) with the Sport Scientist, I felt like I was on fire and hitting the lights pretty quickly. We'd recorded a set to document my recovery and later I posted it on Instagram to keep people up-to-date with how I was doing. Although I got some positive responses to it someone said "wow, you look slow." It really got to me because I'd tried so hard. My body wouldn't go any faster than it was, even if my brain wanted it to. Since then I've heard other people remark on how slow I've looked, and after videoing some sessions of my progress I hate looking back on them. I'm so embarrassed. Yes, I know that I was bound to be worse than before, but it's difficult not to compare myself to how I was before my operation and see how bad I've become at things.

This is another one of those challenges that I predicted would come around, I'd hoped that it wouldn't. But here it is, the point where my mind is ready to go but my body says no. I see inspirational quotes everywhere about working hard until you can work anymore, but to me I can't do that. Last time I tried that I got injured and it set me back further. But then at the same time I feel like I'm not working hard enough. To be honest at the moment I'm struggling. I'm sorry that this isn't a very motivational entry, but I'm being truthful about how things are going and at this point this is how it is.

I'm going to write something that many people will pass off as coincidence, but I'll let you make your own mind up about what it means.

I wrote that last paragraph of the last entry straight after I'd been for a run when I felt at my lowest. That was about 11:45am before joining my mum running some errands (we had a couple of days off so I went to see my parents). I felt that it was important to get the words out while it felt as raw and truthful as possible. This was also the day after we'd travelled back from playing Bristol away. The trip back was really upbeat and the mood on the coach was better than I'd experienced all season, which ended up in a singalong and music playing. Party at the back of the bus! One of the songs that got played, and I knew it would happen because it's a brilliant song, was 'The World's Greatest' by R. Kelly. This song carries a lot of significance for me because it was played at the funeral of my best friend when we were 14, so it always makes me shed a tear or two. I spent the following few minutes reminiscing about Dan and wishing she was still here with me. Unfortunately her brain tumour was malignant and she didn't make it.

I told my mum about the incident of the song being played, and she knows how it makes me feel and understood why I became so emotional. This was around 1:30pm and 5 minutes later we parked up to run another errand. As we parked up and got out of the car I heard my mum say hello to someone, and as I turned around I realised it was Dani's dad, Phil. After not seeing him for years the fact that he was there so soon after talking about Dani left me pretty speechless, I couldn't believe it. It was great to see him because he's such an inspiration to me. People talk about being dealt bad cards in life, and unfortunately that has applied to Phil, but you wouldn't

know it should you spend any time with him. He's such an amazing man, funny, upbeat, always smiling. Not long after Dani passed away, his wife, Jackie, always lost her battle with cancer. And now I learnt that one of his sons, Jamie, had also discovered that he had leukaemia. He explained how he was upset when he read the news about my brain tumour, and in turn this made me feel sad too. He gave me some words of advice that had never meant more to me, and it made me rethink all of the feelings that I'd experienced that morning. Towards the end of the impromptu reunion we were both getting emotional so had to go our separate ways before tears started flowing. For the rest of the day I couldn't get it out of my head. Some things seem too much of a coincidence to be just that.

Later that night I also spoke to my best friend who gave me some more words of encouragement. I'm so lucky to have incredible people around me, and today was a prime example of that.

"Surround yourself with those who are willing to pick you up when you fall down"

Blog Entry 25 - Building back to where I want to be.

The intensity of training is starting to build up now. Yes! I've found that I struggle a lot with any sort of activity that has a long duration, whether that's from my loss of fitness or still my recovery from surgery, or both, I'm not sure. I just know that my body (mainly my lungs) fall out with me when I try and do anything of a high intensity for a longer period of time. I feel okay doing the shorter but higher intensity things, for instance 10 second sprints in the pool. The fact that I feel confident in doing it makes me feel more positive. I suppose that's what people meant when they say don't push yourself too hard too soon and know your body. Having studied goal setting for several years I should really have known to make them realistic. But in this case 'realistic' meant 'patient' which isn't really a word that I would use to accurately describe myself. Then again, setting more attainable goals has helped me get my positivity back, so my advice to people returning from injury would be to do just that. Break down your long term goals so the overall process doesn't seem half as daunting as it would otherwise. Anything is doable, it just takes time and a bit of patience.

I have had a few pep talks from people, notably from the captain Gemma Bonner, who I've gotten closer too during this year. She's been amazing, with frequent Costa visits to enjoy a vanilla latte and chat which has helped us both a lot. So that has helped me to keep my focus on my progress so far, rather than how far I still have to go. Although I know all the right things to say to someone else, it's always totally different when you have to give yourself advice. So thanks Bon, you've been more of a help than you probably imagine.

The only thing I've been struggling with in terms of training, other than the physicality, is running and looking at the ball at the same time. Understandable this isn't ideal as a football, and even less as a goalkeeper - especially when running and catching a cross - is something that I often have to do. If someone who had a more normal job was at the same stage as I am then they'd be absolutely fine, because other than the 'wobbly eyes' when I run I do genuinely feel pretty good. I don't feel like I'm noticing my tiredness anymore, especially now I've been doing triple sessions on some days. That said, I do get really excited to get into bed and sleep at night. But in terms of goalkeeping I feel solid and confident that I haven't lost the ability to catch a football, always handy in my position. I can't wait to get off this warfarin and start properly. I feel tempted to stop it early so I can do contact earlier because that's the only thing holding me back. Then at the same

time I know that my eyes aren't right so on the other hand I wouldn't be fit to play anyway, so is there any point? Then I think that I won't progress my vision as much if I'm not challenging it, and I'm not challenging it if I'm not doing full contact. Answers on a postcard please.

(P.s. Please don't actually send a postcard, by the time you read this I'll be back training as normal anyway. Although I do like getting postcards, so it's your call...)

Blog Entry 25 - Part II.

Okay, so I may have slightly spoken too soon and jinxed myself. The tiredness hasn't gone as much as I initially thought it would have and the realisation hit me like a steam train the morning after my hardest fitness session to date, which was 11 weeks post op. It contained a lot of running, changing direction, and changing speed, the perfect formula to leave me in a heap at the end. And I couldn't even manage to complete the full session. Although not lasting the duration that Kirsty (the club Sports Scientist) had set was really frustrating she assured me that it was more to see what my limit was, and I definitely found my limit.

That night I was exhausted and a good night's sleep didn't do all that much to elevate it, and trust me I slept like a baby. I felt tired when I woke up and that morning we had another session of our personal training course before our training course. Part of the course is to learn about the types of tests we'd give to our future clients and the best method of learning how it should be done was to do it yourself. In this case, a maximal bench press fitness test, and whatever ounce of energy I had left in me well and truly vanished afterwards. For those of you who are not necessarily gym goers, a bench press is when you lay on your back and push a bar up and down in line with your shoulders. I would also just like to add that we all (yes me included) scored above average, just saying. After I'd completed as many repetitions as my arms would allow, I stood up and the pre-faint feelings started. Vision going white, hearing diminishing. I knew it was time to brace myself pretty swiftly before I passed out totally, which is not the look I was going for after trying to style out getting a high score, believe me. Nevertheless I managed to stabilise myself before anything dramatic happened, but it proved a timely reminder that I still wasn't ready to push myself too much just yet.

Blog Entry 26 - A week of mixed emotions.

So much has happened this week. Compared to recent weeks my feeling of positivity is back, although there are still some inevitable highs and lows. My training load has increased again and I'm doing more and more each day, I can start to feel the improvements now too which is so important when you're recovering from an injury. If you can't see your path of progression then it's so easy to lose motivation and feel like you're going nowhere.

This week I decided to stop my warfarin and there were a few reasons I'd decided to do it, most of them football related. I knew I wouldn't be able to totally feel at ease with stopping (and the same applies to my parents) if I hadn't spoken to Andrea about it, but she assured me that it wouldn't be a problem. The significance of stopping the warfarin now means that I can train fully next week, which means the likelihood of me getting some game minutes before the end of the season is a lot higher than I would have been.

I've been doing a lot more goalkeeping specific drills too, even joining in with some of the outfield sessions. My vision and awareness still isn't what it used to be, but it's getting there. Sometimes it feels more like I've just been lucky in what I've done. For instance when I run for the ball sometimes my vision wobbles, and when I make it to the ball it seems like I didn't fully control what I did. I'm struggling to explain what I mean with that, I'm not the best at story telling. Regardless of how I sometimes just have to trust my instinct will do me justice, it's gradually improving which is the most important thing. With a full week of full training next week I'd hope that it would improve a lot more.

With that said about full training next week, a few dives accidentally happened this week, but we decided to not tell the physio. By the time she reads this it'll be too late anyway (...sorry Kat, but I was fine anyway!). To be honest, it's a really good thing that they happened, it shows I still have my reactions. It's so hard to tell yourself not to dive for a ball when it's juuuust there next to you. I didn't really have a choice, my body said 'we're going for this one!' and before I tried to tell it otherwise I was diving for the ball.

The week wasn't all good though, and as I'm writing this part I feel pretty emotional. After being at the club for the whole of Matt's reign as manager he announced to us all that he would be leaving at the end of the season to go to America coaching Boston Breakers. I had a lump in my throat as he was telling us, as did a lot of the team. Matt has been brilliant to me, especially this year with the support he's given me and to learn that he was leaving left me feeling really saddened. He's done so much for this club, building an amazing team and winning the league title 2 years in a row. I've developed so much as a person and a player under Matt too, none more so than this season with everything surrounding my acoustic neuroma brain tumour. Priceless. This weekend will be the last home league game that Matt will be in charge, and I've made a conscious decision not to wear any mascara to avoid the inevitable panda eyes scenario. It will definitely be emotional. Words won't do justice to the amount of admiration and respect that I have for him as a manager and as a person. It hasn't always been an easy process but looking back I wouldn't change any of it and I'll be sad to see him leave. I'm sure he will do an incredible job over there and his new players will be lucky to have him. Thank you Beardie, I'll miss you.

Following on from the sad news about Matt leaving was some incredible (yes, incredible) news about England. A few days ago the England goalkeeper coach gave me a ring to see how I was getting on, and it was lovely to hear from him. Earlier this week I was told by Gemma Bonner (super skipper) that I was on the long list for the squad that would be travelling to China in a few weeks' time. Now, I'm not used to the whole set up with the senior team but from what I gather there's a long list of players from which the travelling squad is chosen from. Being on the long list didn't mean I was definitely going, but regardless of if I was going or not, to be on the list was amazing. The fact that they would be willing to consider me even though I'm not fully fit was such a great feeling and filled me with so much positivity. Something that I'd been lacking recently. I must have done something right on the last camp before the World Cup.

It's like I've built up a mini portfolio of things to focus on when I'm struggling in my sessions, and the England news was added to the list. So far it's working because although I feel slow and unfit, I can tell I'm gradually improving. I've been repeating some of the same fitness sessions as I did a few weeks ago and it's allowing me to see and feel my progress. On a high after the England news I asked the physio if she thought I might be able to play in the Champions League home leg, to

which she answered yes. Pleased with this response I decided to push my luck and ask about the away leg a week before, to which she also answered yes. Now shocked at the response I thought I had nothing to lose in asking about the last game of the season which is a few days earlier. Although it was a more conservative answer, it was a yes nonetheless. Buzzing! Everything I've been doing in my recovery has been geared towards returning for the end of the season, but now I know that it's a genuine possibility and not just a wild goal I'd set myself, so I'm more determined than ever. Especially after hearing the news that Matt was leaving, I feel that I want to make it back before he goes. To make him proud that I'd fought my way back because after all, he's been a massive factor in how I've been able to recover these past 3 months.

Blog Entry 27 - FIRST FULL WEEK OF TRAINING!

This week (WC 28th September) marks 3 months post op, and my first week back into full training. As of Sunday (4th October) we have the final 4 games of the season, although we hope it won't be the end as we still have the Champions League tie to get through and a Cup Semi-Final to play! This was the time that I was supposed to finish my Warfarin, but as I stopped it earlier this is the week that I can train full contact. However, due to yet more injury problems that the team has experienced this season I'm playing at the weekend. An actual match. Me playing. At the weekend. 3 months after brain surgery. If you'd have told me that when I was laying on my hospital bed I'd have laughed in your face. I know I was determined to make it on the bench as a substitute before the end of the season, but to play has massively exceeded my expectations. Obviously to see Libby get injured was the last thing I wanted, she'd been a vital part of the team all season and to lose her was a huge loss. But this begs the question, do you believe in fate? After the year that I've had, to be playing at the end of it feels like a fairytale ending.

Once I got my head around the fact that I was going to be actually playing, I started to question whether I'm in a position to play, am I really ready mentally and physically to do a good enough job not to let my teammates down? After much deliberation I decided that some things may happen for a reason, and that I wasn't going to let this opportunity go begging. I've worked hard up to this point to get myself to the stage that I'm at now, so I sent Matt a message telling him that although I know I'm not at the performance level that I'd like to be at, I'm willing to give it my best and spend the remaining few days before the game getting myself in the best mental and physical state that I could.

In preparation I've started to write down a few notes to remind myself of the simple things, because knowing me I can easily try and over complicate it and try and implement every little thing that I've learnt over the past 7 years. I've also had a conversation with myself about whether or not I'm in a good position to play. The conclusion that me and myself came to was that yes I'm still dizzy, but it's improving with the more I do so I think I'll be okay, and it's been so good to let loose and fly around diving. So I haven't forgotten how to do that at least. I have no fear in terms of getting kicked. Come at me!

There was one point in the week where I saw Libby moving her arm around, considering it was too painful to move on Sunday this was massive progress. The thought crossed my mind that I might not be needed after all, and I instantly had a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. It was at this point I knew that I was mentally strong enough to play. I have no fear, not that I thought I would, but at the same time I could never be sure until I put myself in that situation. But now I'm sure.

I don't know if people expected me to be scared of playing again or not. I guess the fact that I have a £2 coin sized hole in my skull might seem a bit off-putting to someone else considering diving at people's feet (sorry to be graphic), but it didn't bother me at all. If anything, I want to get kicked to prove to people, and maybe a bit to myself, that it doesn't bother me. I know I've had to rush this final part of my recovery and people aren't expecting me to be anywhere near my best, but I feel like I need to be to prevent myself from letting anyone down.

Blog Entry 28 - The first game back.

Sitting in the changing rooms before kick-off I was shaking. I could feel the nerves building up inside me, and although I knew I'd be nervous I never expected it to feel like this. I'd waited so long for this moment and I just wanted to do well, but I knew that the chances of me having a faultless performance was near enough impossible. I had so many emotions going through my head, and so many things that I needed to think about. I was nervous, but very much excited to be back playing. After all, this was what I'd dreamt of doing all those months ago.

The week building up to the game was a mixture of ups and downs. After hearing that Libby's injury was more serious and would keep her out of the games I knew for sure that this was my only chance to get myself ready to play. We only had 4 training sessions, one of which was without the outfield players so that was only half a session. So 3 and a half sessions before my first game in well over 3 months isn't nearly enough, but we had to try and make it work. For that reason training had been pretty rushed as we tried to cover as many aspects of goalkeeping as we could. My reactions felt good, my speed and footwork over a short distance felt good, but my crossing... not so much. Crossing has never been my strongest aspect but I'd gained a lot of confidence in it prior to the operation. My first attempt at crossing brought me back down to earth (not that I could jump very far off it anyway). I was struggling to focus on the ball when combining it with running to intercept it, similar to when I said I felt 'drunk' when I was running. I hadn't built up the power in my legs enough either, so I felt like I was jumping with lead boots on. Both factors weren't exactly filling me with confidence in terms of crosses into the box. If you're reading this and don't really understand football, a large part of my job is catching the ball when it's in my box (which sounds strange when you write it down). On the plus side I was confident in my taking and kicking, so it wasn't all bad. In all honesty I wasn't ready for the game, and I probably shouldn't have been playing the whole game, but as the situation was I didn't have much of an option.

My first game back was against Bristol, a team who had been relegated from the league already. There was nothing to play for in the game as such, except to use it to practice our game plan ahead of the Champions League, but to me it meant everything. It might have been the last game of the season but it was my first. I wanted to do well, and more than anything I didn't want to let my teammates down. It was the last time playing in the league under Matt, and the last time playing with some of these girls. I'd heard that the England goalkeeper coach, Lee Kendall, was there too, so that just added to the pressure I was feeling. There was no pressure from the team, they didn't expect me not to make mistakes, all the pressure was from within me but I couldn't help it. As a goalkeeper there are so many things that you need to think about (no, it's just standing in goal catching a ball), and in the build up to the game I was trying to concentrate on

everything. I knew I needed to simplify it and focus on enjoying the game, something which many people had told me, but it didn't entirely go to plan.

I'm writing this after the game, and the result didn't go as we'd hoped as we lost the game 4-2. There were points in the game where I felt dizzy, like after I made a diving save to my left. As I went from being on the ground to standing up it felt like my head was spinning and took me a moment to compose myself. Luckily the ball went out for a corner so I had a chance to. There were a few other moments when I tried to pass the ball and felt unstable as I was put my weight onto one leg for a split second, and crosses went as expected, not very successfully. When I was trying to move around the pitch, running forward and backwards, I found it difficult to focus on where the ball was and this got more problematic towards the end of the game when I was getting tired. I felt quite lost at times, but I think that was down to it being so long since I'd played, and because I'd had so little training in preparation. It wasn't like I'd never played before, but watching and studying the game is totally different to being in the situation yourself.

I stood in the mirror before the game with my helmet on, and I thought to myself, "Wow you look ridiculous." It wasn't an ideal feeling when I was about to walk out in front of what turned out to be over 700 spectators. I soon told myself to not look at the helmet with embarrassment but with pride. It was a symbol of me overcoming a pretty difficult period of my life so I should be proud of wearing it. I don't know if I should be surprised or not (probably not) but I did get some abuse from the fans behind my goal about the fact I had one on. Luckily it seemed to come from my deaf side (another positive about it) so I didn't pay much attention, but I still heard them. I'll be honest, it bothered me slightly for a minute or so but then it made me laugh. The fact that they don't know what I've been through isn't their fault, it's just unfortunate for them that they're the type of people who felt the need to kick someone while they're down (literally, because I was on the floor after conceding a goal at one point). In the future it won't knock me down, it'll do the opposite. Every time someone tries to make a negative remark about the fact I wear headgear it'll just serve as a reminder of how far I've come.

I'll probably get in trouble when certain people read this and see that I've just been negative, and if this whole journey has taught me anything it's to remain as positive as possible (here I go again with the self-therapy). The game wasn't all bad, far from it. I made some good reaction saves, my distribution and kicking was pretty good, and I was communicating a lot with my back 4. I can tell I was shouting a lot because my throat now feels like sandpaper. To concede 4 goals sucks for a goalkeeper, but making saves is important to me too, and I managed a few today. There's still a lot to work on but it takes time, I know it will. If this game has done anything it's made me 350% more up for the Champions League game in Italy on Wednesday. I'm determined to do my best to put a lot of the wrongs right and build on the performance tonight. Realistically I can't have hoped for much more, or much less. These were the wise words of Pottsie (Joe), my goalkeeper coach, and he was right.

It was an emotional time for me after the game, I didn't really know what to feel. I was so disappointed with the result, but I was proud to be back playing, and proud that my parents were there to watch too. I managed to hold in the tears until I made it back to the changing room, although there were a few moments that were touch and go when I hugged my parents, and Pottsie said he was proud, as well as Lucy Staniforth giving me a pep talk. Really, all I wanted to do was to do people proud in my performance, and I hope I did that. They told me I had, so hopefully they're not just humouring me with the response that they think I'd like the most! But I don't think

they did, and for that reason deep down I'm happy with how it went once you get passed the mistakes on the surface. Onto the next one!

Blog Entry 29 - Champions League Debut.

So, after a year of wishing to be playing in a Champions League game I finally got the opportunity. I was nervous, really nervous, but unbelievably excited. If you show me a football player who wouldn't want to be a part of a competition playing against the best teams in Europe, then I'd tell you that they shouldn't be playing football at all. Although I was anxious, I was less so for the game a couple of days ago (even though a couple of days ago feel like a lot longer with how hectic our schedule has been). I'd got the initial 'returning to playing' nerves out of my system, because looking back I think I was worried about how my body would actually react to playing 90 minutes. Turns out it did okay. I was also determined to do a lot better than the Bristol game, clearing more of the cobwebs away. I still wasn't fully recovered because catching crosses was still a bit of an issue balance wise, but I was getting better at being more aware of my surroundings and more confident in what I was doing. In the space of 3 days the improvement was more than I thought it would be, which I'm hugely pleased with. It goes to show, if you put yourself in the situations that make you struggle with any post-op symptoms that have, you'll either make your brain improve or you'll find other ways to compensate and work through it.

I was hoping for a huge crowd because it would add to the occasion, and I'd dreamt the night before that it was a sell-out, which in my dream made it an incredible game. In reality it wasn't a sell-out, but there were still probably over 5000 fans there, and if at any time I felt my nerves or the atmosphere getting to me in the game, I just kept telling myself 'it's just like playing FIFA...'

Our travelling fans were brilliant that night, singing constantly throughout the game and making themselves heard about the rest of the Italian support. It was your typical European atmosphere, which I'd hoped it would be. They had flares and were constantly singing (and shouting) the whole game. Amazing. My job in goal relies on communication to the rest of the team, and I swear I've never tried to shout as loud in my life in order to make myself heard over the supporters. At the end of the game I'd lost my voice, and my abs were hurting from being constantly tensed. The male contingent of the Italian fans were behind my goal in the second half, and for 45 minutes I had pretty much constant abuse from them, but I loved every minute of it. They were probably making fun of the fact I had a helmet on, but due to the fact that I don't speak Italian I was none the wiser, which was probably for the best in hindsight.

The fact that it was so loud in the stadium together with the fact that I'm deaf on my left side meant that there was no chance of me hearing anything going on to the left of me unless my focus was in that direction. Ingrid (Ryland) and Lucy (Staniforth) seemed to enjoy telling the story of trying to get my attention during the game;

Ingrid, "I was shouting 'GIBBO, GIBBO!' at the top of my voice, and Lucy was just in front of me."

Lucy, "Yeah but I told her 'GIBBO'S DEAF ON THAT SIDE SO SHE CAN'T HEAR YOU!'"

Ingrid, "Yeah so I said 'I KNOW! THAT'S WHY I'M SHOUTING!'"

I'll be honest, I found the story really funny myself too, so I think I'll have to pay more attention to what's going on to my left more than I would beforehand. Watching the video back of the game I could see exactly when this happened, and the best part is, I probably should have given her the ball if I'd have heard her.

The game itself was a really enjoyable experience, and I loved every minute of it except the part where I let in a really needless goal. Nobody likes making a mistake, nobody likes making a mistake and losing the game, and nobody like making a mistake when all they want to do is perform well when the rest of the team are working so hard. But it happened, I conceded a goal that I really should have saved (sorry, girls). If I was in the situation as myself of 2 years ago I would have mentally been out of the rest of the game and I would have let it get to me too much. But, thanks to the tumour I've changed as a player and although I still feel devastated with making mistakes, I'm able to move on from it and remain positive. That's what I did. I'd like to think I played okay for the rest of the game, but I'm not usually one to say that I played well (I'm my worst critic). I just know that I played the rest of the game in a positive mindset regardless of what happened, and I wouldn't have been able to do that if I hadn't been through hell and back this year. Every cloud has a silver lining!

Blog Entry 30 - The Media Coverage.

When I first decided to make my condition a public thing, I knew that I would probably have to do a few interviews about it but nothing really prepared me for the amount of interest people would have in my journey. Being a relatively shy person I'm easily anxious about public speaking or interviews, but in this case I feel confident and proud to be discussing Acoustic Neuromas and my personal experience. I think this is because it's a subject that I know a lot about so there aren't any trick questions that I won't know the answer to (obviously I'm not a genius when it comes to brain surgery so there are many things that I don't know). Whenever I finish an interview they always seem surprised and thankful of my honesty and openness to talk about everything related to the tumour, to which I always reply "Oh just wait until you read my blog." Each time this surprises me because I wouldn't have expected to be doing an interview about it, only to hold a lot of information back. It's safe to say in this blog I've put everything down that I've experienced, whether or not my future self will like that it to be confirmed. I welcome every interview I'm asked to do because as well as raising the awareness of ANs, I also hope that I'm proving to people that as long as you stay patient, positive and determined, there's always a way to get back to a place that you want to be. As well as interviews with newspapers, the FAWSL, the Liverpool match day programme and the LFC Magazine, I've also done a couple with LFC TV and the BBC and the response these has been more than I could have expected.

Prior to the Champions League game in Brescia, Italy LFC TV broadcast an interview that I'd done whilst at the hotel. As the game was shown live there was a studio panel that discussed my tumour after my interview was shown, including Kate Longhurst who was unfortunately injured and couldn't travel with us. Of course I only heard about what was said after the game itself, but the nice words spoken by the panel did make me feel slightly better after the poor result and somewhat realigned my focus back to the positives rather than the poor result of the game. My parents had told me that they cried with some of the things that were said about me after the

studio panel were saying how much of an inspiration I was. Something that I struggle to label myself as. Afterwards I had many messages on twitter, and speaking to the fans after the game was very humbling, especially after they told me about their worry of me getting hurt. To me, it doesn't feel like I've done anything extra special. Players who suffer hamstring tears can be out for as long, and after missing 12 months with my ACL injury this felt like a short period of time in comparison. I sometimes find it difficult to accept that such words as 'inspirational' and 'amazing' are aimed at me, there are other people out there who have done more courageous things than I have.

I also did an interview with Jo Currie from the BBC. As it was after a number of similar interviews I felt like I was the most confident in speaking to Jo, whether that was because I was more used to it, or just because Jo made me feel comfortable I don't know. But I do know that receiving messages from people who don't even play football, and aren't even in this country makes me incredibly happy that it can reach as many people as it has. Each tweet or message I get about helping someone makes my decision to open up and put myself out there all the more worthwhile. That said, I will never feel comfortable listening to my own voice or seeing myself on TV because it's totally not how I imagined myself to sound.

Blog Entry 31 - Too High Expectations?

It frustrated me that I'm not as good as I was before, but like I've said I didn't expect I would be. Although part of me hoped for some sort of miracle that mean I was. I already know that writing this part of the blog is going to be one of the most difficult parts because I have to spend time thinking about and analysing some of the hardest moments of my football career to date.

For the majority of the time my hearing hasn't been too much of a problem other than missing the occasional piece of information or not knowing the direction of sound. But it's come to my attention that it's been more of an issue than I realised, because in games I've had a tendency to focus on the right side of the pitch rather than the left. When you're lacking confidence and haven't played for a long time then you revert back to the things that you're most comfortable with and have to think the least about. And as I have hearing and sight on my right side I think it's subconsciously meant that I automatically go to that side first, probably in everyday life and not just football, I just hadn't realised until it was pointed out. I'd heard that people aren't confident in me, and are questioning my ability in terms of my deafness. It's one of my biggest weaknesses in terms of football, and probably life in general, I care too much about other people's opinions, and it takes a lot of energy for me to keep my moral up to where it needs to be in order for me to perform as well as I can. I suppose this can be how other people with AN symptoms can feel, and it's something that I wish I could control better. Although, I think over the past months I've gotten a lot stronger in that respect. I tell myself, and I'd tell other AN suffers, that these are things that you should be proud of, proud that you've come through something that has been a huge challenge in your life, and use the newfound strength of overcoming surgery to prove people wrong and stand tall. Don't be embarrassed, don't be ashamed, and if anyone tells you otherwise then let them see that negative remarks are nothing in comparison. (I find it hard to take my own advice sometimes)

It's been extremely difficult both physically and emotionally playing as early as I did. Although people claim that they understand, with all due respect, unless you've been through it yourself then you really have no idea. I knew I wasn't ready for these games, players and staff knew I wasn't ready, but given the circumstances I agreed to give it my best shot. But at times I didn't feel like I was protected from those feelings, and so as well as trying to keep my head above water during the games I had to battle with myself to stop the feelings of the lack of confidence from affecting my performances more than it did. Football is a cut throat business at times, and especially in knock out games where there is no real room for error the pressures on players and staff are immense, no matter how much they try to shelter themselves from it, that's just the way it is. I don't have much experience in other job sectors but I imagine that the pressures can be the same. But if you don't put yourself in those environments then the exhilaration of success is nowhere near the same.

Goalkeepers need a different type of mental strength compared to other positions, because no matter what goes on in front of them to allow the ball to reach the goal, the book always stops with us. We are the last line of defence when it comes to conceding a goal. During these 3 games I've had to do that more than usual, which took its toll both in the games and out of the football environment. It's been mentally exhausting. Conceding 7 goals in 3 games was massively disappointing personally, I felt like I'd let the whole team, the club, and the fans down. I've learnt over the years that I have to be mentally stronger, and I can tell how far I've come. There would have been a time, even at the start of my Liverpool career 4 years ago, when making a mistake in a game meant that my performance would be impaired for the rest of the game. Now, even if I do feel huge disappointment in any mistake I make, I try my upmost not to let it affect anything else I do for the rest of my time on the pitch. You're allowed to think of the negatives for a certain amount of time, but then it's time to move on and learn from your mistakes. This doesn't just apply to football, or to Acoustic Neuromas, but to everyday life too. I think this brain tumour has helped me with that to a certain extent too, so hopefully other AN sufferers can use their tumour as a platform to build a stronger mental strength. I'm a strong believer in the phrase, as clichéd as it is, "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger."

The performances of the last 3 games haven't been what I'd hoped, but realistically they should have been what I should have expected. With little training and preparation the likelihood of me firing on all cylinders was pretty slim, regardless of the amount of football I'd been watching in the past months in an attempt to mould myself into the 'perfect' goalkeeper. The past 3 months have been tough, and to be dropped into a situation that I was hugely unprepared for has been hard, harder than anyone can imagine. I'm my own worst critic, and I know that there has been a lot of criticism from the coaching staff too which is to be expected with playing at such a high level, it comes with the territory, I get that. I've done my best, and at times I know it's not been good enough. I do feel like I've let people down but I'm sure that in time I'll look back on this and feel proud of what I've achieved, but in this moment I feel disappointed. Maybe I'm missing the bigger picture but my main focus in those games was to win, and although I was hugely proud to be playing again, I struggle to get past that fact. But there's no doubt in my mind that I will come back even better than I was before.

Blog Entry 32 - Epilogue.

I've had some time to reflect on the past few weeks, and I'm already feeling more positive about coming through it as I have, though I feel like I owe a lot to the people who have helped me to get to this point so quickly.

I mentioned before about being included on the long list for the England Senior trip to China, and unfortunately I wasn't selected. Although if I'm being 100% honest I should never have gone anyway, I'm not at a point in my recovery where I would have benefited significantly from going. Saying that, I was still gutted because to go away with the Seniors at any point is a huge achievement for me. On the plus side, I have a good few weeks of solid training which is all I've wanted since I first come around after the surgery so I'm very happy to be finally getting the opportunity to do it. I can already feel a huge difference in myself in training, I feel more relaxed and I'm enjoying it again (the enjoyment factor diminished slightly during the past 4 games of the season). I feel like the weight of the world is no longer on my shoulders, and I can already tell I'm improving in each session. I know that there's still so much more to come, which I find really exciting.

We have a new manager now, which means a new start for the football club. Scott Rogers, who worked as Matt's assistant for the past 3 seasons has been given a promotion. Personally, I'm really pleased with the appointment because I have a lot of faith in him and the way he wants us to play football. I also feel like he's been extremely supportive of me over the past year and I want nothing more than to repay him with developing myself as a player and becoming the best that I can possibly be under his management. After the stop-start nature of the past 2 years I'm glad I can wipe the slate clean (kind of) and have a fresh start. The determination I feel to perform next season is stronger than it's ever been before, and I think a lot of that is down to the tumour, so it's yet again come in useful for something.

Hopefully if you've read the blog so far you'll remember me talking about Nicola, the woman who I was offering advice to in the build-up to her surgery. I'm extremely pleased to say that she's had the operation and is doing really well. I recently visited her in hospital to see how she was doing and she's doing great. Her young daughter, Poppy, and her husband, James, will no doubt look back on her journey and be incredibly proud of her, as I am too. Knowing how terrified she was before the operation I'm relieved that it all went to plan, though I was confident that it would. Nicola had thanked me for everything I've done for her up to now, which I didn't feel was a lot other than offering her reassurance and telling her of my experiences. Thinking about it makes me feel a bit emotional, the fact that she feels I've helped her cope up to now means more to me than the fact I've been through it myself. Hopefully it'll be the first of many, but I feel like I've definitely gained a friend in Nicola. I find it comforting being able to talk to someone who has been through the operation now and had experienced all the feelings that I'd experienced before. To anyone who is struggling with anything, looking for support with someone who will understand your situation is something that I will strongly recommend, for both people.

I haven't mentioned it up to now, but I was having regular meetings with a psychotherapist to help me cope with the issues that I had going around in my head. I know that therapy is a taboo subject for a lot of people but I personally feel that there is nothing to be ashamed of or embarrassed about in admitting that you've seen a counsellor. I know myself that it has helped me more than I thought it would, and I found it a 'safe' place to go and offload any of my stresses I was experiencing, whether they were directly related to my tumour or not. Although I don't have sessions any more, I feel like it's taught me a lot about how to look at situations in life and work

with my inner self. Don't let any pre perceptions about going to see a counsellor stop you from going, because you never know how much it might be a benefit until you give it a go.

I know that I haven't commented too much about my eating disorder in this blog, even though I know it's something that a lot of people can probably relate to. At times I didn't feel like it warranted mentioning, and at other times I didn't feel comfortable discussing it either, but I feel like I should do it now before I press 'save' for the final time. As much as I hoped it would have disappeared, it hasn't. However, there are times when I worry a lot less about it than I would have done before, and even at its worst it still hasn't been as bad as it has previously been. I think a lot of that is due to my state of mind (this will be analysing it at the same time as I'm writing this out). I've been positive about my recovery, football, health and life in general for the majority of the time over the past 4 months, and leading up to my operation. This has been something that I've focused on in the times where my anxiety about food has reached a high point, and for the most part I've managed to talk myself around to be less stressed about it. There have even been times where I've chosen what I WANT to eat rather than scrutinise the labels for the amount of fat in it. Who'd have thought it! As I continue in my recovery (because yes it's still ongoing) I feel confident that I'll keep learning how to deal with the problem. I can't imagine a time where I won't worry about it at all, but I can definitely see some sort of light at the end of the tunnel in terms of rationalising the thoughts that pop up in my head where eating is concerned. Put it this way, I think I'll enjoy my Christmas dinner this year without worrying too much about it. For me, I think a mix of happiness and positivity has helped me the most and allowed me to refocus in my times of need, when my own mind has come to the rescue. I've even managed to find someone who likes me for me, even when I wasn't particularly liking myself at the time (...rumours! ;)).

I can fully appreciate how difficult eating disorders can be, and how much they can rule your life. Being someone who is somewhat close to being in a place where I feel like I can control it the most, my main advice would be to help yourself be happy, whether that means listening to happy songs or planning your next trip to the gym. Focusing on happy moments in your times of need might be all it takes for you to flick the switch in your brain and help yourself through each moment. And talk to someone, not necessarily someone that is going through the same but someone who will understand and accept the fact that you're suffering from an eating disorder. I felt so much relief after I had told my closest friends about my problem, and I knew that they would understand and not judge me for it. They understand that sometimes I feel the need to examine the menu when we go out for meals, but they've made me feel like it's not an issue for them and now we joke about it. Even if you don't believe that it will ever go away try and have faith that in time it will get easier and will no longer rule your life.

So 4 months down the line you might be wondering what my symptoms are like now, and to be honest they're pretty good. I still have the tinnitus in my deaf ear, and if I have that for the rest of my life it won't be the worst thing in the world. On the other hand I guess it's not all that long since my surgery, and Andrea did say that it might settle in time so I'll just have to wait and see. In terms of the hearing loss I'm definitely more used to it now and have learnt how to adapt to certain situations. I've learnt that I have to apologise straight away to anybody who ends up sitting to the left of me, and always give them permission to give me a little punch should they need to get my attention. I always try and put myself in the left side of people or groups, this way I can hear most of the conversation, although I do tend to miss bits. I try to be as open as I can and make a joke out of the situation wherever possible, after all there's nothing I can do about it so I don't see much point of letting it get me down. People often ask me about my fatigue and how it

feels now too. It's coming to a point where I'm not actually sure if the fatigue I feel is a remanence from the operation, or if it's simply from the amount of training we do. Either way, the fact that I don't know the answer must mean that it's not really causing me too much of a problem. If I was certain it was from the operation then I probably wouldn't be able to train at the intensity I have been doing, so I think it must be a mixture of both. Similarly to my fatigue issues, my balance has significantly improved in recent weeks though there's still quite a bit of room for improvement. The only times when I feel like it's a problem is when my eyes are closed (which was difficult before the operation anyway), or when I try and balance when I'm tired. Both of which would ordinarily make balancing more difficult, but I feel like it's exaggerated more than it would normally be. On the whole I feel great in terms of my symptoms especially when I think back to how I was feeling in the immediate days following the operation, I've definitely come a long way!

Blog Entry 33 - END (for now).

This whole journey has been a very long process, and there's still a long way to go. But I've reached the goals that I'd set myself, which is still surprising to me. I could easily keep writing about my life but things will seem less significant, so I feel like this is a good time to let go. The longer I keep it to myself, the less chance it has of reaching someone in need. Things have happened which seemed like fate, there have been many ups and downs, and I've realised that I have some incredible special people around me who will have apace in my heart for the rest of my life. There's no secret to how I've got to this point, no special formula, just hard work and patience.

Life is full of high and lows, mistakes and difficult choices, but all of which shape an individual into someone who can deal with any given situation, drawing on difficult life experiences to make better choices and live a more positive and fulfilled life.

Think it would make a good film. Imagine if you went through the first 23 years of your life without encountering any problems, difficult decisions or illness. What would you be like? You'd have nothing to turn to if you come across a difficulty, and no way of helping someone else in need. Every single life experience, good or bad, big or small, are infinitely important in making a positive difference not only to your own life but to those around you too. Don't look at problems with a negative mindset, look at them as valuable life lessons, events that will fill you with pride when you've made it through, and fill others with pride to see that you've come through too. If you have no bad times in life, you have no good times either, they wouldn't be appreciated.

I will never be able to take credit for getting to where I am now, because there are so many people who probably don't realise how significant they've been to me. I will be forever grateful to the medical team, Professor King and Professor Simon Lloyd along with the rest of the surgical team and the staff on the wards. Andrea has been there for me, and countless other patients throughout it all and I know that my parents and myself cannot thank her enough for the support that she's given us all. My stay in hospital was made a walk in the park thanks to the company of Audrey and Liz, I hope that they see this and get in touch because I'd love to know how they were both doing. Of course, my family and friends have been a constant support throughout it all. My best friends Alex Day, Kate Taylor and Becca Hall have always been there for me to turn to should I need a shoulder to cry on or a distraction from everything going on around me. Mary Earps, another of my best friends has always been at the end of the phone (or a 3 hour drive) should I

need a pep talk, and always knew the right thing to say as well as when to make me see the bigger picture. Liverpool Football Club have been brilliant throughout, with a special mention to Matt Beard and Scott Rogers and Joe Potts. Kat Wise and Kirsty Hicks have been priceless since I first discovered the tumour and the need for surgery, up to my continued recovery now. Although they claim I've done it on my own, I will always be thankful for the help and support they have given me. The well wishes from everyone in the football community hasn't gone unnoticed and each message of support has been touching from football fans both of the FAWSL and around the world, to the players from other teams in the league, to complete strangers who don't even follow football. All of your thoughts and prayers have been inspiring to me. It wouldn't be right if I didn't thank the Liverpool LFC squad of 2015 because they've inspired me to be reunited with them following the operation, and I doubt I'd have been back playing so soon without their understanding and support.

So thank you to each and every player, I love you all. My housemates, Lucy Staniforth, Line Smorsgard and Ingrid Ryland have also been brilliant, and very understanding with my deafness when I seemed to ignore what they were saying. Not to mention Gemma Bonner's countless Costa trips when the odd moan about life was needed. The PFA have also been a great help during all of this, especially Marie-Christine Boucher for the countless things she's done for me over the past months, and for putting me in touch with the psychotherapist who has helped me to keep the right perspective. Those of you who know me know my love of dogs, so an extra special mention goes to my best doggy friend, Lola for putting up with my at times slow pace on our walks. And of course thanks to her mum Emma for letting me steal her from time to time.

Most of all I'd like to say a special thank you to my parents, Karen and Dave. Those who know my family will know that we have all experienced countless health issues in the past years, and the fact that they were both able to put all of that to one side and still be such a strong pillar of support for me is something that I find incredible. I hope that in my lifetime I will grow into as strong a person as they have both been. I could easily write another 10,000 words on how much I admire them and thank them for their love and affection throughout my life. But they'll only try and use it whenever they want a cup of tea so I'll just leave it at that.

Last but not least, I want to thank you, the person who has spent some of their precious time reading about me wittering on about my life. I hope that I haven't bored you too much, and I hope even more that some of my words have been useful in some way. At the start of this blog it was more for me to stop things from bottling up inside, but I soon realised that I wanted to do it more for other people and I've got a lot more satisfaction from that than just to keep it for myself.

The end.

(I've always wanted a reason to write that)