

LSUHS Podcast: The Power of Physical Therapy

Audio	Video
Mark Klein: If you needed motivation to get through your day, this is the podcast episode for you. The man you're about to meet was living a life defined by strength—serving his country as a veteran, protecting our community as a firefighter, and pushing himself to the limit as a weightlifter. But everything changed in an instant following a cardiac procedure. Mac McCoy suffered a stroke that left him unable to walk and confined to a wheelchair. That's when he came to the Physical Therapy Clinic here at LSU Health Shreveport, beginning a journey guided in part by Dr. Matthew Martin and the Neuro Rehab team. What happened next? Let me introduce you to him, and you'll see. Our guests today are Mac McCoy, Army veteran, retired firefighter, and stroke survivor, as well as Dr. Matthew Martin, Clinical Assistant Professor of Physical Therapy here at LSU Health Shreveport. Glad to have you guys here today. Mac McCoy: Thanks for having me here. Dr. Matthew Martin: Thank you.	Mark, Matthew Martin and Mack McCoy Interview in a Television Studio

Mark Klein: Exciting stuff. I want to jump right in. Take me back to what happened. What led to the cardiac procedure, and ultimately, what happened after that?

Mac McCoy: Well, the cardiac procedure started after I came back from deployment. I went to see my doctor about some other issues. During a physical, he discovered I had an aortic aneurysm because he heard a heart murmur.

Like every patient, I didn't believe him at first until he put the stethoscope on me and I heard it myself. I'm pretty deaf, and if I could hear it, it was loud. He immediately referred me to a cardiologist, Dr. Walton. I saw him the next day and had an echocardiogram.

The technician doing the test didn't have a very good poker face. She kept looking at the monitor and then looking at me. Before I left, she told me, "Please don't go and do anything today." I knew something was up.

I got home, walked through the door, and my phone rang. It was Dr. Walton. He said, "Mac, you've got an aneurysm that's dilated to 5.4 centimeters. We need to get you to a cardiothoracic surgeon as soon as possible."

The care was phenomenal. We went in and did the surgery. It went off without a hitch. In fact, the surgeon wrote in the report that it was one of the most textbook procedures he'd ever performed. The problem started about ten minutes after they woke me up. I'm lying in bed, surrounded by some of the smartest doctors in the world, and everything seemed fine. Then all of a sudden my left leg went dead.

I knew exactly what was happening.

I literally told them, "I'm having a stroke right now."

They all stopped and looked at me. I repeated myself a little more forcefully and threw my arms out. When they saw the left-side drift, everybody sprang into action.

Mark Klein: Let me pause you there for a minute. Most people have never experienced a stroke before. What does that feel like? What's going through your mind and your body in that moment?

Mac McCoy: My mind immediately went to, "Life as I know it is over."

How am I going to take care of my family?

My physicality is what always got me through everything. That's how I made my living. If that's gone, what am I going to do now?

That was what I was thinking. I remember wondering how, after everything I'd lived through, this was going to be the thing that took me out.

Mark Klein: Physicality has always been a huge part of your life. Army veteran, firefighter, weightlifter, bodybuilder—you don't do

any of those things sitting down. When did that determination and drive begin for you?

Mac McCoy: That's been my whole life. My dad was a firefighter. We worked on a farm. Football, military service—the whole nine yards.

Being physically prepared was always important. If you're physically prepared, whatever you run into is going to suck less, and you're probably going to do pretty well.

When I joined the military, I volunteered for some specialized schools. They really drive mental and physical toughness into your head. Your body will tell you it hurts and wants to quit, but the mind controls the body. If you can take the pain, you'll be okay.

Mark Klein: In that moment after the stroke, you're thinking about your family. What comes next?

Mac McCoy: Some of the most painful things I've ever experienced in my life—and I've been blown up before.

Rehab started immediately in the hospital. I spent about a month there. The doctors were fantastic, and as soon as I got into a regular room, they started rehabilitation.

Mark Klein: At that point, you couldn't walk and were wheelchair-bound, right?

Mac McCoy: No, I couldn't walk at all. I discovered just how important one leg really is.

Mark Klein: And that's where the long walk back begins.

Mac McCoy: Exactly.

They wanted to transfer me to inpatient rehab. Everyone was discussing transportation around me, and I finally interrupted and asked my wife, Michelle, if she could drive me.

They said it might take another week to arrange transport. I told them I'd get myself into the vehicle and ride the whole way if that's what it took.

So that's what we did.

She drove me to the Willis-Knighton inpatient rehab facility, and that started the next month of rehab. Every day, twice a day.

I'd start with occupational therapy. They were supposed to help me shower, get dressed, brush my teeth—all the simple things.

One therapist saw me hopping around on one leg and told me to stop before I fell.

I told him, "If I fall, I'll get up."

They'd move my wheelchair across the room, and somehow by the time they came back, it was next to my bed again. They called me stubborn.

Mark Klein: And they were right.

Mac McCoy: Absolutely. Then we'd get to physical therapy.

I've done brutal military workouts. I've had professionals beat me to death physically. Nothing compared to trying to get that leg working again.

The simplest movements exhausted me.

Mark Klein: Spoiler alert for anyone watching the video version—looks like it worked pretty well.

Mac McCoy: It did. And I credit Matt and everyone who helped me through it.

Mark Klein: Speaking of the silent guy in the middle, how did you get connected with LSU Health Shreveport?

Mac McCoy: While I was in inpatient rehab, they started talking to me about my options.

I asked one question: "Who has the coolest stuff?"

One of them immediately mentioned the LSU Health Faculty Clinic.

Mark Klein: That's going to become our next commercial slogan.

Mac McCoy: They started describing the technology and the research environment. I knew immediately that's where I wanted to be.

I was on a timeline. I wanted the most cutting-edge tools available.

I got discharged on a Friday or Saturday, and I was excited to get started. Monday morning I had an appointment with Matt.

I was up at five in the morning and trying to rush my wife out the door. I have a rule—if you're fifteen minutes early, you're on time. If you're on time, you're late.

I got impatient trying to load into the car, hopped on one leg, and had what I call a "controlled descent."

When I arrived and started filling out paperwork, the receptionist asked if I'd fallen recently.

My wife immediately said, "Yes, he fell."

I corrected her and said, "I didn't fall. I had a controlled descent." Everybody laughed.

Soon after that, Matt and another therapist named Gabby came to perform my evaluation.

Mark Klein: Matt, what were your first impressions?

Dr. Matthew Martin: Mac has done a great job describing his personality.

Gabby and I knew immediately that motivation was not going to be a problem. That's incredibly important in stroke recovery.

Patients who can self-motivate and who have strong family support tend to have dramatically different outcomes.

Our first impression was that this was going to be a wild ride—and it absolutely was.

Mark Klein: Walk me through that ride. What are the milestones you're working toward?

Dr. Matthew Martin: One of the most important parts of a physical therapy evaluation is understanding the patient's goals.

For Mac, we knew immediately those goals would be higher than average because of his background.

We establish a baseline, determine where the patient wants to be, and then identify what steps are needed to get there.

One of my favorite things as a neurologic physical therapist is recreating real-world activities inside the clinic.

Mark Klein: What did that look like for Mac?

Dr. Matthew Martin: Since he wanted to return to firefighting and heavy lifting, we simulated those activities.

We have an actual ladder in the clinic, and I'd make him climb it, stand on it, reach from it, and perform progressively more difficult tasks.

Eventually we worked our way back into lifting weights.

The closer we can make therapy resemble a patient's real environment, the better the outcomes tend to be.

Mark Klein: At some point all that work starts paying off. What's it like the first time you walk again?

Mac McCoy: Honestly? That's not how I'm wired.

For me it's a benchmark. Okay, what's next?

The biggest feeling wasn't walking. It was the day I got rid of the wheelchair.

I called them, told them to come get it, and I never looked back.

That was liberating.

Mark Klein: Matt, what's it like watching patients rebuild themselves under your care?

Dr. Matthew Martin: It's one of the greatest privileges imaginable.

We enter people's lives during some of their most vulnerable moments. Our job is to give them hope—not false hope, but genuine hope.

One thing I appreciated hearing Dr. Lin discuss on a previous podcast was the idea of the one-year recovery timeline after stroke. Mac is a perfect example of why we shouldn't limit people with those expectations.

We worked together for nearly two years, and he continued making tremendous progress well beyond that first year.

Research shows us that intensive exercise actually drives the development of new neural pathways. Through specific interventions, we can help the brain rewire itself and regain function.

Watching that happen every day is incredible.

And I always remind people: the patient is doing the hard work. I'm just the facilitator.

Mac would come into the clinic with videos from the gym and say, "This movement doesn't look right. Fix it."

I loved that.

Mark Klein: Walking—check. Running—eventually, check. But then you start lifting competitively again.

Mac McCoy: Weightlifting has always spoken to me.

Bodybuilding requires discipline in nutrition and recovery.

Powerlifting requires a different kind of discipline—you willingly crawl under extremely heavy weight and challenge yourself.

The gym has always been my refuge.

It's just you and the bar.

Some days you win. Some days you lose.

Mark Klein: It doesn't sound like motivation is ever an issue for you.

Mac McCoy: Oh, there are plenty of days when I don't want to train. That's where discipline comes in.

Discipline beats motivation every time.

I saw that during rehab. There was a patient who wasn't putting in any effort, while the therapists were working incredibly hard to help him.

Finally, I yelled across the room, "If you don't want to be here, then don't be here. Let somebody else have the opportunity."

Later the doctor told me I shouldn't have done that.

Then she thanked me.

Apparently it motivated him.

Dr. Matthew Martin: One thing that stood out about Mac was that telling him not to try something usually guaranteed he was going to try it.

My job often became finding safe ways for him to attempt the crazy things I knew he was going to attempt anyway.

He never looked at a challenge and said, "I'll never be able to do that."

That mindset allowed him to accomplish incredible things.

Mark Klein: Speaking of incredible things, let's talk about the Arnold Classic.

Mac McCoy: I competed in the Arnold Classic this past March.

Mark Klein: That was the most casual way possible to say that.

Mac McCoy: That's just how I am.

It wasn't even on my radar.

Last year I decided I wanted something to push me, so I started competing again.

My goal wasn't to win. It was simply to complete the meet successfully.

I competed in local meets, won my age division, won the overall division, then competed in the Louisiana State Championships and did the same thing.

My coach eventually asked if I'd ever considered the Arnold.

I laughed.

He convinced me.

So I trained from September through February and went to compete.

I met athletes from all over the world. It was surreal.

I only missed one lift all day and ended up winning my class.

It was an amazing experience.

Then I immediately started thinking about what comes next.

Mark Klein: Afterward, you sent Matt a text. Why was that important?

Mac McCoy: It wasn't really about the Arnold.

A guy named Jason came up to me at my gym.

He was using the same foot-drop brace I'd worn after my stroke.

He told me he'd suffered a devastating motorcycle accident and almost didn't come to the gym that day.

Then he told me something I'll never forget.

He said he had seen me training in that brace and that I was the reason he came back.

He told me, "God put me here today to see you."

That meant more to me than any medal.

He said he was doing what he was doing because he saw me keep going.

That hit me hard.

Sometimes the will to keep going is difficult.

But maybe that's why all of this happened.

Mark Klein: For people who may be beginning a similar journey, what would you tell them?

Mac McCoy: That's easy.

You can quit.

Just quit tomorrow.

Mark Klein: I love that.

Matt, when you got the text and saw what he'd accomplished, how did it make you feel?

Dr. Matthew Martin: The first thing I thought was, "That's Mac."

It was an extraordinary accomplishment, especially after a stroke, but it was also completely consistent with who he is.

The meaningful part was that years after we stopped working together, he still wanted to share that moment.

Physical therapists spend a tremendous amount of time with patients. We develop relationships that last.

To walk alongside someone from a wheelchair all the way to achievements like this—it truly is a gift.

Mark Klein: One final question.

What would you say to students considering a career in physical therapy?

Dr. Matthew Martin: If you're considering physical therapy, chances are you already have a desire to help people.

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This profession gives you an incredible opportunity to do exactly that. You get to build meaningful relationships with your patients and watch them accomplish things they didn't think were possible. My advice is simple: never stop learning. Continue studying, continue growing, continue seeking the most evidence-based ways to improve patient outcomes. If you dedicate yourself to that pursuit, you'll build relationships that are incredibly rewarding, and you'll discover tremendous joy in your work. Mark Klein: Thank you both so much for your time. Mac McCoy: Thanks for having us. Dr. Matthew Martin: Thank you.	
Mark Klein: As impactful as it's been to sit down with both of you, I think the most impactful moment for viewers may be what happens after we're done here—you'll stand up and walk out under your own power. Congratulations, and thank you for sharing your story. If you have a story you'd like to share, we'd love to hear from you. Reach out to us at LSU Health Shreveport. You can email communications@lsuhs.edu. The LSU Health Shreveport Podcast is available wherever you get your podcasts, including Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Amazon, and YouTube. We'll see you next time.	LSUHS Podcast animation.