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Youngster McCallum refuses to let epilepsy curtail his rugby playing

The HKFC youngster has had two seizures on the field but insists his condition is no big deal

Rachel Jacqueline

PUBLISHED : Saturday, 28 December, 2013, 9:40pm

UPDATED : Friday, 03 January, 2014, 9:48pm



Teenager Jake McCallum is Hong Kong's first known epileptic rugby player. Photo: Michael Perini

Jake McCallum will celebrate a few firsts as he laces up his boots next week: the first training of the year, his first time on the pitch in six weeks and, most of all, becoming the first known epileptic rugby player in Hong Kong.

McCallum has been patiently biding time pending a medical all-clear after suffering two seizures in two weeks on the field at King's Park in November, both times while in trials for the city's under-19 team.

"I desperately want to get back to it," says the frustrated 16-year-old. He insists epilepsy is, for him, "no big deal" and is keen to get back to playing rugby - and getting on with life.

Epilepsy is a common neurological brain disorder characterised by seizures. It affects around 60,000 to 70,000 Hongkongers and 50 million people worldwide.

McCallum counts himself lucky - he's suffered only seven seizures in the past three years - and shrugs off the oft-misunderstood condition.

"I don't want to be fazed by epilepsy; it shouldn't be a big deal and I try not to make it a big deal," says the confident flanker for the Hong Kong Football Club's under-19 team. "As long as people are aware of it and how to deal with it, if I have a seizure, there really shouldn't be much of a problem."

Besides, for McCallum, the experience isn't a painful one. "I've never experienced myself having a seizure, I just black out and wake up with a bad headache," he says.

McCallum is, of course, not the first rugby player with epilepsy. British & Irish Lions star Tom Smith has enjoyed a successful career despite suffering from

I've never experienced myself having a seizure, I just black out and wake up with a bad headache

JAKE MCCALLUM

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the disorder. Through connections with the Hong Kong Rugby Football Union, Smith reached out to McCallum recently to share his experience with the young talent.

Smith's message was clear: Epilepsy is very common and dealing with it in rugby will make you stronger and set an example for your team.

"Be strong and be yourself. Your values are important and that is what defines you, not epilepsy. Epilepsy is just something you deal with," Smith told McCallum.

Smith's encouragement, coupled with support from family, has imparted a determination in McCallum to inspire others with epilepsy to get involved in sport. He hopes to support the work of local charity, Enlighten, in raising awareness of the condition in the future.

He credits rugby, a physical sport where he's learned to "pick himself up", for equipping him with the resilience to handle his new life with epilepsy. "I'm probably more determined now. [Sport] plays a bigger role than a few years ago, after epilepsy."

Recent studies have shown that sport and other physical activity may play a role in decreasing seizure frequency and improving the overall health of epilepsy sufferers.

As HKRFU medical manager Lucy Clarke points out, there is "generally, no reason why anyone with epilepsy should be precluded from playing rugby".

Adds HKFC coach James O'Connor: "In the same manner as [Tom Smith], Jake is a role model, not only for his rugby teammates, but for all aspiring sports persons, irrespective of the sport, who face similar challenges.

"Apart from raising awareness of this specific condition, it also demonstrates the wider point that having a disability does not necessarily equate to having an inability."

The McCallum family are also supportive of their son's rugby career and eager for his return to the field. "We see no reason for him to stop being active and playing the sports he loves and had been playing most of his life," says Jake's father, Matthew.

"The competitiveness, fair play and camaraderie Jake learns through rugby are important personal traits we'd like our child to have, regardless of a health condition; that being a good rugby player means he has to be strong and fit is perhaps an additional benefit for him to better confront his illness."

Avoiding the social stigma faced by many epilepsy sufferers in Hong Kong and indeed the mainland, where six million people have the condition, is a further comfort.

"We've found that when kids get diagnosed with a condition in Hong Kong, a lot of parents will ban their kids from playing sport. But the best thing is to encourage kids to play sport and continue doing what they love.

"As long as everyone knows there's a condition and the medical staff are aware, there really should be no problem," said Matthew McCallum.



Jake McCallum with Tom Smith at the Enlighten gala dinner. Photo: HKRFU

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Jake McCallum speaks at the Enlighten gala dinner, watched by Canto-pop singer-actress Karen Mok Man-wai. Photo: HKRFU

Ultimately, Jake says he believes it's not epilepsy itself which is the real problem, but the fear of a seizure.

"If you're constantly thinking, 'What if I have a seizure right now?', that will do more damage than anything else. If you let it control you then it can really ruin your life," he says.

His advice to epilepsy sufferers - young and old - echoes that of the sporting great Smith: "Just try and move on with your life and make the most of the right now."

This article appeared in the South China Morning Post print edition as McCallum will not let epilepsy ruin his dream

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