

That Brace

Ever since I can remember, there was that brace.

I was 18 months old when I became part of the largest Polio epidemic in US history, summer 1952. After a couple months in a Dayton, Ohio hospital, I was back home to the little travel trailer that my parents were living in at the time. My first memories were after they bought a house and I had learned to walk with the brace. Shortly after that we moved to Warren, Pennsylvania.

That brace became a large part of my identity, on my right leg, holding it straight. In those days made of steel and leather. But I was a busy boy, very active, and like other polio people of my generation was encouraged to “be normal”. And I was. I walked to school, and did just about everything except play baseball and run track.

It required special shoes where a steel socket had been installed so the brace could attach to the right shoe. This always presented a problem in places where people were expected to remove their shoes, and going to the beach was always a choice between struggling to walk from the parking lot to the water without it, or putting it back on after swimming and trying to keep the sand from getting between me and the leather.

Walking with a stiff leg presented its own set of problems: walking in more than a couple inches of snow, for instance; or sand, or grass; or, walking along a slope where the uphill side was on the right.

It seems that it was always rubbing on me somewhere: on my hip, the kneepad, the ankle joint, often drawing blood – but I learned to just live with it. Also, all of my trousers had one or two holes at the knee unless they were very new – it never took long for the point of the knee joint to cut that hole. Originally there was only one ring lock at the knee, but they improved the design later on and put a ring lock on each side of the knee joint which made the brace much more dependable – but that meant that most of my pants had a hole on each side of my knee, instead of only one.

The brace man would come to Warren from Erie for “Post-Polio Clinic” that happened every few months with the support of the Warren County Crippled Children’s Committee and the First Presbyterian Church. The brace would always need some kind of adjustment – after all, I was a growing boy. As a teen-ager one such adjustment earlier in the day caused the brace to break just as I was pushing the brake pedal of my father’s Volkswagen Micro-bus resulting in my first auto crash.

Then there were those times when I would have the opportunity to be with a girl – I didn’t want to be rubbing that “thing” against her – I got very adept at unfastening it and slipping it off from under my jeans.

Later on I was in New York City. As a young adult, I wasn’t growing any more, and it had been years since the brace had had maintenance. And, as always, it was always

rubbing a hole in me somewhere. Finally, I took the damn thing off and threw it in a dumpster. The leg, while weak, kinda worked, and I started walking with a cane. That's the way it was for the next 41 years. After a few years I started using a stool on stage, but other than that I was hauling musical equipment, and still acting normal as the leg got progressively weaker due to the nature of Post-Polio Syndrome.

More and more, I was supporting myself with my arms – bracing my right leg with my right arm, and leaning harder on my cane with the left – until finally my shoulders and hands just quit working. It was the scariest time of my life and I really didn't know if I would ever be playing stringed instruments again – particularly the big bass fiddle.

It was clearly time to think about getting a brace again. Fortunately I had recently joined an HMO that made it unusually easy to get one – I only needed a prescription from my primary care physician. After hearing of the experiences of other polio people, I realize that I was very fortunate to be where I am because the new brace has been damn near perfect, and has enabled me to do things I haven't been able to do since I was a kid.

This one is a little different than the 1950's model. For one thing, it is made of aircraft aluminum, and instead of requiring a custom shoe, it has a plastic foot mold that fits into the right boot that I was already wearing (only requiring that I remove the insole to adjust the height of the foot mold). It has a plastic hip support and calf band instead of metal and leather and a Velcro strap at the top instead of a buckle. But, it has the same classic leather kneepad of yore – And I insisted that the hip support come all the way up under my right buttocks so I can completely support my weight on the brace, just like I did for all those active years of childhood. One other improvement comes in the design of the knee joint. It still has the same ring lock, but the big pointed thing is gone so my pants have fewer holes at the knee.

Returning to using the brace has given my shoulders and hands the time to recover their strength and flexibility, for which I am hugely grateful. My mobility is greatly enhanced and I can now stand to play on stage for a few songs, which is really handy if you are just sitting in for a couple songs to not have to haul a stool.

©2017, JACrozierMusic – ASCAP – <http://jimcrozier.com/>