



carefree caitlin

Caitlin Bouchier, 18, is not letting her sporting injuries stop her from smiling and living life to the fullest!

My family moved to Australia from Durban, the third most populous city in South Africa when I was 18 months old. We moved so we could have more opportunity growing up. I have grown up in Australia with a tight-knit South African community. I love my family's culture. My parents have tried to keep it alive for my siblings and me while living here in Australia. We often come together with our South African friends and eat traditional foods, such as biltong (dried, cured meat), bunny chow – a hollowed-out loaf of bread filled with curry, and milk tart, which has lots of cinnamon and a pastry crust.

I have not been back to South Africa, but I'm planning on going back soon. I would love to see my family again. I also want to take a safari trip, and go cage diving with great white sharks!

I graduated from high school last year. I enjoyed school, apart from the stress it brought every now and then. I played a lot of different sports, my favourite being netball. Netball is such an empowering sport, no matter your skill or fitness level. I feel most alive and free when I'm on the court, playing with my team. We played together for five years and though our last game induced a lot of emotions, it was a perfect end to a terrific season.

Throughout school, I found myself trying to work out how to balance getting good grades and doing well in sport. It required a lot of hard work and dedication. I definitely preferred sport over academics because it gave me some of my most cherished memories.

Since finishing school, I've managed to learn a lot about myself. I've become more independent and realised I am capable of doing what I set my mind to.

I tore the ACL (anterior cruciate ligament) – key ligaments that help stabilise your knee joints – in both my knees on separate

occasions from landing awkwardly in games of netball. I had my first ACL reconstruction in 2017. That was hard. When I lost my sporting ability, I found myself doubting who I was and what I was called to do. My injury tested my faith.

When netball was stripped away from me, a large chunk of who I am was stripped away too.

When I jumped back into playing last year, after nine months of rehabilitation, the feeling was amazing! I'd returned to what I was really good at. But in my fourth game back, I tore the ACL in my other knee. I had reconstructive surgery in April this year. It was hard, going through all of that again, especially so soon. But I've come to understand more about myself – I'm no longer finding my worth in what I do and achieve.

What I've learnt from all of this is what you're going through doesn't last forever, even though it might feel that way.

Seasons do come and go, so embrace where you're at. Also, do whatever you can to stay involved in the things you love during your studies. It can become stressful, but having an outlet you're passionate about will help keep the balance.

At the moment, I have a casual job as a waitress in a café. I'm also studying a leadership course at my church and volunteer as an events coordinator for my youth group. Next year I'm excited to go to uni to study a Bachelor of Clinical Exercise Physiology.

I'm still recovering from my second ACL reconstruction. Until I can throw myself back into netball, my time is spent in work, leadership training college – and a whole lot of rehabilitation!