

FIGHTLAND

“A Lumpy Badge of Courage: the Status Symbol of Cauliflower Ear”

By: Quinn Mulhern, March 27th, 2014

The year before last, I finally got Cauliflower ear. Why it took 10 years of grappling on jiu-jitsu mats and over 20 pro fights, I have no idea. But when it finally happened, I breathed a sigh of relief. I was finally in the club. I had the official personalized certificate of fighting attached to my face at all times.

You might be wondering, “What *is* Cauliflower ear anyway?” Well, I recently had a chance to interview renowned facial plastic Surgeon, [Michelle R. Yagoda](#), M.D., in order to get an expert opinion on Cauliflower ear. At her practice in New York, Dr. Yagoda has been treating Cauliflower ear for over twenty years. Here’s the skinny (i.e. the lumpy) on what *it* actually is:

Cauliflower ear, also called “boxer’s ear” or “wrestler’s ear,” is an injury that deforms the appearance of the outer ear. The ear is a surprisingly delicate organ and very susceptible to trauma. When the ear is hit and a blood clot (hematoma) develops under the skin, or the skin is pulled from the underlying cartilage, the connection of the skin to the cartilage is disrupted and the cartilage withers and dies. The ear folds in on itself as the cartilage shrivels and blood flow is compromised, becoming bumpy, pale, and wrinkled (hence the name). It is also at higher risk of infection.

Before this happened to me, I had always thought my ten-year immunity to Cauliflower was genetic – maybe my ears were too flexible, I wasn’t sure. And a rational part of me was thankful for my normal ears. I knew I could go to family reunions and job interviews without stares and judgments.

But the rational voice in my head was often drowned out by another voice – deep down, in my heart of hearts, I wanted gross lumpy ears. In the world of MMA and jiu-jitsu, Cauliflower ear is right of passage. It is a symbol of badass-ness. Who cares what the rest of the world (or the rational part of my brain) thought about it? I was kind of envious of those who had it, even though Cauliflower ear is not always an accurate measure of experience. I’ve known people who grapple for a month and get huge, monstrous ears, but don’t really know how to fight. Despite this injustice, I was still unable to change my normal, well-formed ears.

All of this changed with one ill timed, poorly executed double-leg takedown, which happened early last year while I was sparring at Jackson's. When I shot in on my training partner, trying to take him to the mat, his hips came down with such force on the side of my head that I saw stars. What I didn't quite notice was that he had basically punched my ear with the sharp part of his hipbone. At first, I didn't feel anything wrong; but by the time I got home, my ear was already ballooning with blood.

According to Dr. Yagoda, here is what I should have done:

If someone has already sustained trauma to the ear, he should be treated promptly by an otolaryngologist (a doctor who specializes in the care of the ear, nose, and throat) before cartilage damage becomes permanent. By draining the hematoma, (either through aspiration by needle and syringe or via an open incision) the surgeon can reconnect the cartilage to the skin, apply a special sewn-in dressing to compress the layers together, and prescribe antibiotics to prevent infection.

Instead, I made the decision to keep training – without draining it, and without wearing headgear. I wasn't so excited to be getting my wish anymore, and I was pretty embarrassed that I ever had that wish in the first place. However, I had an "it comes with the territory" kind of attitude, and so I kept training, and my ear kept growing.

By the time I decided to drain it, the ear was so inflamed that I was getting headaches and an electric sensation shooting down my neck. My ear was bright red, golf ball sized, and shaped like some horrifying laboratory experiment. My sleep was affected the most. I would fall asleep on my right side, but wake myself in the middle of the night when I rolled over. I tried sleeping with headgear, or a specially designed pillow, but none of it really worked. Despite all of this, I still decided to train.

It turns out I'm not alone in having this stubborn mentality. Dr. Yagoda has dealt with a lot of combat sport athletes over the years, and has come to recognize the fighter psyche:

The most unsettling circumstances, although sadly not the most unusual, are the cases in which an injured boxer or martial arts participant continues to go back and fight despite the Cauliflower ear deformity and it's repair procedure. I explain to these men (and occasionally women) that the likelihood of an additional injury is high and is paired not only with jeopardizing that reconstructive result, but also the ability to re-create anything resembling a normal ear in the future. To me this outlines the physical, mental, and monetary expenses associated with these seemingly "addictive" contact sports!

I couldn't have said it better myself. Finally though, my addiction was trumped by the shear pain of my swollen ear. I relented and decided to spend two weeks mostly off the mats, and then two months with headgear. Thankfully, my ear began to heal. When I say, "heal" what I really mean is that it began to harden. Healing was kind of a bygone notion at that point. I had missed my window.

What I ended up with was a sort of calloused lump where the flexible cartilage had once been. There is still an option at this stage, as Dr. Yagoda once again elucidates:

More advanced cases of cauliflower ear require plastic surgery to reconstruct the damaged section of the ear. Cauliflower ears are notoriously difficult to repair. Cartilage grafts as well as cartilage shaving can repair the shape of the ear and are best left to specialized facial plastic surgeons. Occasionally, the other ear is cosmetically modified during the time of surgery to attain better symmetry.

Ah, symmetrical ears...my lifelong dream. There is still hope for me, although, at this point, I kind of like my messed up ear (and the other one is starting to lumpify a bit too). I think it's pretty clear I'm not a plastic surgeon's ideal patient.

Considering all the discomfort and lost sleep, if I had to do it over again, I would have taken better care of myself. I had to learn the hard way that Cauliflower ear really isn't worth much as a status symbol. Still, like all the scars we get doing the things we love, it tells a story. This story might not be very heroic, but at least I'll always have it close at hand. And in that sense, I feel a certain warm-fuzzy feeling about my ear. It's like an old pet that still putters around the house – not so cute anymore, but perhaps, still loveable.

Source: <http://fightland.vice.com/blog/a-lumpy-badge-of-courage-the-status-symbol-of-cauliflower-ear>