

Paul “Watto” Watson, 52, and George Malacof, 45, met and became mates in 1988, the same year George became a quadriplegic. Despite being confined to his bed for the past four years, George continues to inspire “Watto”, a former NRL strength and conditioning coach who now runs his own training business.

2 of us

Paul Watson & George Malacof



Paul: I met George in my first year at uni [in Sydney]. We were both mature-age students studying for a diploma in exercise science. We got on really well right from the start and became good mates. I was about the only guy who wasn't scared of him. He was a wild one; a real larrikin. He was also really, really fit. He used to play a lot of rugby league and he was always pretty quick.

At the end of uni he'd been invited to go to Myall Lakes for the weekend. He flipped a coin to help him decide whether or not to go. The coin said “no” but he rang me and said he was going anyway. I couldn't go as I had to work, but George liked a girl who was going; that was one of the deciding factors.

A few days later I got a phone call from one of the girls who George had gone away with. She told me they'd been mucking about and jumping off a boat and George had had an accident; he'd snapped his neck. They had spent most of the morning in the water with him waiting for the helicopter to come. It was a bit of a shock. I went straight to the hospital but he was pretty out of it. They stabilised him and put a clamp on his skull to pull his neck and spine apart. Even with his head in traction he was saying, “I'm going to walk again.” I was shattered. I started to cry and I had to leave.

It took George years to accept that he wouldn't walk. He always thought he'd beat it. He's been through a lot of rehab and he still thinks there will be a breakthrough. He used to be a bit more mobile, but over the last four

“Paul used to take me out quite a lot but I've been stuck in bed for a little while now ... for about the last four years.”

is the lowest thing on the bottom of the ocean – and he gets a pounding and then he gets back up again.

His brain is still so active and full-on and I often call on him to help me get things done. When I was with the Penrith Panthers [as strength and conditioning coach] I made George my manager and asked him to negotiate my contract. I found it hilarious because instead of being my friend, he'd talk to me like my manager and not George my mate. He took it so seriously. He's Greek, so he is good at negotiations. If I ever need anything done, George will do it for me. He gets it organised.

It's part of friendship to get annoyed by your mates. Whenever I get cranky with him, I feel bad. I think, “Why am I cranky with a quad?” We've always stirred each other up. At uni I stirred him up a lot. He was notoriously well-endowed and I wrote “tripod” on his locker in black Texta and he didn't like that.

Realistically, I don't think George will ever walk again.

years he's developed a lot more physical problems and that is something he has had to come to grips with.

But whenever I see him, he is still as positive as ever. It's hard for me to imagine what being a quad is like – they go through these negative cycles of health. George keeps hitting shark shit – which

But I'd never put it past him. I go and visit him quite a lot to be with him and talk to him. If I can do anything for him, I will, but most of the time it's just about talking and being there for him.

George has home care three times a day. They come in to bathe him and do his washing and help him out, but in between those times he is by himself. When George first had his accident he moved away from his family because he wanted to be independent and not be a burden. That shows the make-up of him as a man.

George nearly died recently. One of his carers found him unconscious. They had to perform an emergency tracheotomy, which should have killed him. It didn't kill him and he's back to his annoying self.

George: I've known Watto for a long time now. It's not just a friendship. He's part of me. Without him, I couldn't imagine my life. I snapped my neck back in 1988. I was on a yacht that was moored on the beach and my foot slipped and I slammed my head into the sand. Paul used to come up to the hospital two or three times a week, while he was still going to uni and doing part-time work. We both knew what snapping my neck meant. It was like, “That's it, you're not walking any more ... you can't do this and you can't do that.” I think Paul was quite shocked about the accident but he has never given up on me. I will do anything for him and I know he would do anything for me. Paul is a busy man and at certain times I do have to kick him up the backside and say, “Pull your finger out and go and do this”, or “Get here and see me.”

Paul used to take me out quite a lot but I've been stuck in bed for a little while now ... for about the last four years. A few years ago one of my lungs collapsed and I was on life support. I had an operation and don't remember four weeks of my life. The first thing I did recall when I became aware of my surroundings was seeing Paul at my bedside.

Since I had my accident Paul has relied on me to get things done for him. I practically built his house. He was busy with work and he needed me to do a lot of the organising. Being bedridden can be tough but there's no such thing as, “I can't.” There's only, “I've got a little bit of difficulty.”

Paul makes my life both easier and more difficult at times. He is one of the few people who can get under my skin and get away with it. Even though we both get to each other, I will be the first one there for Paul when he needs me. When Paul's mum died, that was really hard. I knew her very well. I did a reading at the cemetery. Paul didn't ask me to; he told me to ... which wasn't a problem ... I'd do anything for him.

Paul has always treated me the same. Back when I was able to get out and about he'd just leave me in the wheelchair and I'd say, “Paul, can you get me out of this wheelchair and put me on the lounge.” He'd just look at me. I'd say, “You have to help me. I can't do it.” But that's just him; he treats me the way he always has. I stir him and he stirs me and I stir him until he says, “Go away.” The only difference is that I can't physically get to him the way I used to and rough him up.

Paul is a man of his word. He has character and integrity ... he is very open and these are all really good traits you look for in a friend. We often bounce ideas off each other – whether it's to do with training or something in our personal lives. He confides in me more than anyone else. A lot of people ask me “What did Paul tell you?” and I just say that's nobody else's business.

I have become depressed about being in bed over the past few years and Paul has helped me through it either by being here physically or phoning me. When I told him I was depressed he slapped me over the head. He said, “Come on. Get on with it.” I couldn't imagine Paul not being part of me and my life. He doesn't even give me the slightest bit of sympathy. He's lucky I can't get up and give him a good belting. **GW**