

# Embracing Vulnerability

Professional wakeboarder. Larrikin. Tetraplegic.  
Motivational speaker. And now a published author.



FINDING PEACE: Brad says his life coach Susie was a huge influence in changing his mindset. Photo credit: Jade Whirley.

Eight years ago, Brad Smeele's life changed in a moment. The former professional wakeboarder was an innovator and known for pushing the limits of the sport.

In 2014, Brad won the Trick of the Year Award with the world's first double tantrum (back flip) to blind over a mega ramp. Only weeks later, he suffered a heavy crash attempting to land that same trick again. Brad broke his neck and became a tetraplegic. He was 27.

Now Brad has released his first book; *Owning It—The Ride That Changed My Life*.

It's an incredibly vulnerable and personal account of his life that you'll struggle to put down.

*Owning It* covers the out-of-control high times of a global sporting superstar to dealing with depression after his life changed overnight. It delves into the dark times of losing his mobility and dream. And finding hope in that journey.

We caught up with Brad to reflect on the process of telling his story and finding peace with his injury.

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—Brad Smeele

**It's crazy. I never thought I'd be a published author, but here I am.**

**What's the feeling like when you go to a shopping mall and there is your book alongside some big name authors?**

Yeah, it's wild. I guess that makes it a lot more real. There were a few stages of it becoming real. From handing in the first draft to then signing off the final proofread and then receiving my first copy.

The next stage was receiving a box of books from the printer and then my launch party and now the final stage is going into stores, actually seeing it on the shelves with the big names. It's crazy. I never thought I'd be a published author, but here I am.

**The physical process of writing this book—you wrote 500,000 words over a seven-year period—how did you manage that?**

It was a challenge. When I started, it was before Apple had included the swipe-to-text feature on their keyboards. So, in the early stages I was like a woodpecker, pecking away at the screen with a mouthstick stylus in my mouth, doing individual letters at a time. But part of the way into writing the book they added swipe-to-text, which meant I could swipe from letter to letter instead of pecking them. That probably doubled my word count per minute, and it was a lot easier on my neck as well.

**The response from the media and reviewers has been incredible, were you blown away by that?**

Yeah, it's been well received, and I am humbled by that. When you release something like this where it's a very vulnerable telling of my life and all the ups and downs and everything from sex, drugs, partying, all the good times and bad times and putting it all out there you get a bit nervous doing so. But that's part of the journey and part of what the title is as well. It's *Owning It*, owning all the good and bad of what we have going on in our lives. And embracing that.

I was nervous chatting to the media about that stuff. But they understood the reasons for being so vulnerable. That was good confirmation.

**What are you most proud of in this book?**

The feedback from people from all walks of life. They've said: 'That was amazing' and 'I couldn't put it down'. I've had great feedback about how honest and raw it is. I've had people tell me 'I love that you shared things like sex before and after your injury', things which a lot of the time gets glazed over.

I knew my story would be packed full of inspiration. But I was unsure about how people would find the process of reading it and how immersed into it they would get. I've never been a writer. This is my first crack at writing a book so to get that feedback was gratifying.

**What did your parents think of the book and you going to a place that is so vulnerable?**

Yeah they were stoked. They've always been proud of everything I've done. I know my Mum struggled to read certain parts of the book, what her son was up to before his accident. Also, how tough it would be for a mother reading the parts after the accident, too. She struggled with that.

But my Dad, he's got Parkinson's disease and he's a big inspiration to me throughout this post-injury life and how he's handled his situation. So, it's cool to be able to like voice that in the book a little bit as well. They are really proud.

**It's fully uncensored. How did you manage the process of what you were going to share?**

It was all part of the journey that I was on mentally and having to work through all of the struggles—it was about embracing vulnerability. I was learning along the way as I was writing. I was struggling and suffering. I hit rock bottom and then I was going through breakthroughs where I started to realise things.



LOOKING UP: Brad is full of hope again.  
Photo credit: Liam Vandenberg.

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—Brad Smeele

I wanted that to be authentic so that people know that it is the journey that is needed to go through in order to move past something like this and be happy again. To find peace with this type of injury.

Too often we bottle things up or glaze over things. I wanted to put my story out there as strongly as I could. I want people to go on the journey with me. My hope is there will be some takeaways and tools that people will be able to apply to their own situations.

**How hard was it to relive your story?**

The whole process was cathartic. It was a struggle being in first person and present tense. There were times I put myself into a state of depression, not intentionally, because I was having to dig into the stuff I was writing about.

It was challenging along the way. But it was part of my healing journey. I wanted to get things out and process them. I also wanted to share the stuff that doesn't get spoken about that often. From random erections to





*FLYING HIGH: Brad says one of the hardest parts of writing the book was reliving his life before the accident. Photo credit: Chris Garrison.*

shitting yourself or whatever, everything that I went through and had to adjust to—that's all in there. It was all part of my journey.

**I imagine it would have been difficult to recall your life before the accident.**

That was the hardest part in the whole process. It was challenging mentally to think about my life before my accident. It's hard to go back there.

The most challenging part when it came to the actual writing was crafting the learnings from Susie, my kinesiologist and my life coach. We had conversations with her helping me through everything that I needed to learn. I had to go back and remember, and create dialogue. I'm proud of how it all came together.

**The SCI community will benefit from how honest you have been, was that one of your goals?**

Yeah and not just someone with a spinal cord injury. It's people being able to relate in any sort of struggles. I tried to make it broad so people can apply these lessons to anything whether it's financial struggles or a break-up or divorce or loss of a loved one or whatever. So hopefully there is something for everyone.

I guess it's the same with the stuff I post on social media. It's good to be honest so others can benefit from your struggles and what you have learned.

**What have been some of the ways you've won the mental battle and stayed positive?**

Remember that it's all temporary. The bad times aren't

going to last. And honestly, neither are the good times. It's all ups and downs and it's realising that happiness and peace in our lives isn't necessarily a destination, but more a journey that we need to go through constantly.

We have to be willing to face the reality of the struggles we're going through. In a situation like mine, with a spinal cord injury, it's not easy to brush them aside. You can't make yourself feel better by going for a run or going to the gym by getting a good workout or having sex or whatever it is, these kinds of coping mechanisms that we may have used in the past to avoid or cope with life.

All of a sudden, I was in a place where I was forced to face it. So we've got to be willing to do that and digging into the beliefs behind the emotions and everything that we're going through. The key thing is sitting with emotion—as opposed to pushing it aside—and trying to learn from it.

**What would you say to a 27-year-old Brad who was coming back from overseas and at the start of the journey with a spinal cord injury and scared about his future?**

I mean to be honest 27-year-old Brad probably would've told me to piss off if I came and tried to tell me anything about how my life was going to be OK [laughs]. I didn't want to hear from someone in a wheelchair about what my life was going to be.

But if I said something, it would be learn along the way. You can find joy and love in life and have great experiences regardless of a spinal cord injury. It's about embracing change and learning to adapt along the way. @@