“Our coach told the boys, ‘I don’t care what you do, kick those doors down”.



“After my cardiac arrest there was lots of talk of being lucky. I shouldn’t be lucky. People should know that if something happens at a sports event or somewhere else, there should be someone there trained to save their life”.

Heinrich’s day was a usual one, he was running a bit late to rugby training at his rural Taranaki club, Coastal Rugby. It was a cold night and he joined in on warming up with his team and started feeling slightly out of breath, but he remembers thinking this was because of the cold.

He remembers feeling a cold chill travel up his neck, feeling breathless and needing to take a knee, and feeling a thud. Heinrich was in Cardiac Arrest.

South African-born Heinrich lives in rural Taranaki with his wife Sophie and two young sons Bruno and Milo. Heinrich is a builder and prior to his arrest was playing for the Coastal Rugby premier rugby team.

He was fit, and healthy but at 35 and the oldest in the team, he was feeling a little bit slower than in previous seasons “I’d struggle a bit and take a knee during games if under pressure”.

When he collapsed the rest of his team continued jogging – but they realised something wasn’t right.

“At first, they thought I was playing a prank – my captain looked over and was yelling at me to get up. They heard a weird noise and realised something was not quite right”.

“Our coach Trent came over and said, ‘Right boys he’s having a heart attack – time to get into CPR’”.

In the team, there were a number of trained surf lifeguards, and they quickly knew the importance of starting CPR, and providing breaths as they were located 30 minutes from emergency services responding – and they needed to get an AED fast.

Team members were allocated tasks, of course, the CPR, but also calling 111 and getting the AED from the club rooms, which were found to be locked.

“Our coach told the boys, ‘I don’t care what you do, kick those doors down”.

The club had received an AED the week before as a donation from the Rugby Foundation and they were still deciding where to put it, so it was in a locked office in the club. The team kicked down two doors and found the AED.

Because of how far away emergency services were, rescue breaths were really important in ensuring Heinrich had the best outcome. "The discussion came up about who was going to do breaths and the guys were a bit reluctant. Our captain said 'You share beers with this man! What is a bit of saliva!' and he took on doing the breaths himself".

By the time the AED was found, the team had been doing CPR for 10 -12 minutes with multiple members of the team swapping to take over compressions. The team was starting to feel “pretty gloomy” thinking they couldn’t get Heinrich back.

Liam who was a member of Heinrich’s team said the event “was hard to put into words. But it happened out of nowhere”.

“These guys are my close mates, and they were in shock. One of the guys had done first-aid training so many times but he drew a blank. He put the AED pads on backward, but they still worked”.

Liam said he was grateful for his training in CPR and AED use. “Lucky enough I did a first aid course 3 weeks prior to the incident so using the AED was still fresh in my head. Another guy who does first aid courses all the time grabbed it and me and him set it up. There was nothing from ‘Heiny’. He was unconscious, unresponsive, and struggling to breathe.”

“Our captain kept saying to the guys ‘We aren’t stopping’”.

Liam remembers putting the AED on Heinrich and noticing a change in his body “After we put the AED on him after the first shock he came back to life which shows how important this is. I believe he would not be here today if it wasn’t for the AED.

The team did another round of CPR and the AED delivered a second shock “and I just sat up”

“I opened my eyes and said what’s going on?”

“My chest was bloody sore, I thought I’d been knocked out then I saw the AED pads on my chest.”

Heinrich remembers not feeling sick or anything abnormal he just remembers seeing his friends.

“The guys told me I hadn’t had a pulse for 15 minutes. It dawned on me that this was pretty serious and it’s still surreal.”

Heinrich remembers his teammates, whom he would describe as ‘pretty tough’, looking pale and crying. “They’d had the biggest shock of their lives”.

The Rescue helicopter arrived 10-15 minutes after Heinrich became conscious, closely followed by Ambulance and Fire and Emergency 30 minutes after Heinrich collapsed.

Heinrich was found to have two arteries 100% blocked and his aorta 20% blocked.

He spent a couple of weeks in Waikato Hospital had open heart surgery and had two arteries replaced. Heinrich was found to have no heart or brain damage, which is a credit to his teammates who did high-quality CPR and rescue breaths for an extended period of time.

Heinrich is hoping to get back on the rugby field as he feels he has some “unfinished business”.

He has a personal mission to encourage rugby clubs and has been working with the Rugby Foundation to install AEDs in all rugby clubs. “Clubs need to step up and think for their member's safety on the field. Have a good think about the people that are in your clubs and save a life.”

“It’s a big thing for me as a rugby player that clubs have an AED for their members. We join clubs because it's a great community. The last thing you think of is I'm going to have a heart attack.”

Read more World Restart a Heart Day Stories:

[“I felt quite fortunate to have done my full first aid course, if I hadn’t, I would’ve been even more panicked.”]

["When the rubber hits the road you want to have the muscle memory of knowing how to do CPR."]

World Restart a Heart Day