

# MEET MR KALAI VANEN - THE PARA POWERLIFTER

“On the topic of arthroplasty allowing one to restore an active lifestyle, I would like to introduce Mr Kalai Vanen and his inspiring story.” - **Prof Andrew Tan**, SGH Orthopaedic Surgery.

The 64-year-old Paralympic powerlifter for team Singapore has been an inspiration to many, and is known to be a nurturing mentor to younger para-athletes under his wing. Standing at 183cm and weighing around 100kg, **Mr Kalai Vanen** is often seen with a smile plastered over his face, animatedly sharing his life experiences with others. At the gym, he is seen lifting incredulous weights with ease. However, he is no stranger to adversity. At the age of 22-years-old, what started as persistent left knee pain was subsequently revealed to be a giant cell tumour at his knee. At the age of 29, Mr Kalai had to undergo a leg amputation operation because of a leg tumour. He did not let the adversities he faced affect him, but instead rose to become a champion in his sport and in life.

In 2015, at the age of 56, Kalai was introduced to the sport of power lifting. In spite of his late start to the sport, Kalai's love for the sport and his determination led him to represent Singapore and medal at many international powerlifting events, often beating athletes half his age. He became an inspiration to many, and a mentor to other para-athletes, including Nur Aini (who is an inspirational figure herself).

In 2020, he developed severe shoulder pain arising from osteoarthritis that prevented him from training and competing, and he underwent a total shoulder replacement at the Singapore General Hospital.

When most would have ended their competitive sports career then, which was advised by his surgeon, **Prof Andrew Tan**, Head of SGH Orthopaedic Surgery, Mr Kalai proved again to be different.



## Shoulder Replacement Surgery

Shoulder replacement surgery (shoulder arthroplasty) involves replacement of the shoulder joint with a prosthesis so as to provide pain relief and improve one's quality of life and ability to participate in their daily activities and hobbies. In Singapore, replacement of other joints, such as the knee and hip, are better recognised and more prevalent. However, shoulder arthroplasty is a viable and recommended treatment option for patients with arthritis of the shoulder joint, but has been less familiar to the public.

The first shoulder arthroplasty implants were first developed in 1893 by French surgeon Péan, who had used a platinum and rubber implant to replace a shoulder joint which had been destroyed by tuberculosis. Since then, we have had significant developments to arrive at the modern day shoulder arthroplasty implant design and techniques.

**Normal Shoulder Joint**



**Shoulder Joint with Arthritis**



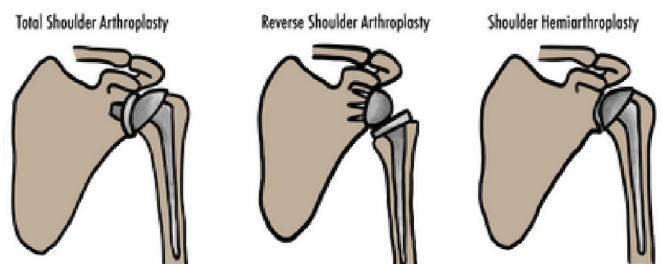
Indications for shoulder arthroplasty include:

- Osteoarthritis of the shoulder
- Rheumatoid arthritis of the shoulder
- Post-traumatic arthritis of the shoulder
- Severe tear of the muscles around the shoulder (rotator cuff)
- Disruption of blood supply to the shoulder bone (avascular necrosis)
- Severe fractures of the upper arm

Individual experiencing symptoms of mechanical shoulder pain and limited range of motion of the shoulder may warrant further evaluation for underlying shoulder arthritis. Diagnosis and further evaluation is done using radiographic imaging in the form of X-ray radiographs, computed tomography (CT) scans and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI).

Management of shoulder arthritis can be non-surgical or surgical. Often, a trial of non-surgical management with physiotherapy, rest, activity modification and painkillers is first considered. But in some patients with severe arthritis or high physical demands for their lifestyle, shoulder arthroplasty may be required. Various forms of shoulder replacement surgery exist, and your surgeon will decide on the best surgical treatment.

After shoulder replacement surgery, patients undergo progressive physiotherapy sessions to work on improving their function in terms of range of motion and strength. It is a common misconception that patients who have undergone joint replacement are unable to return to sports. In fact, most patients with joint replacement surgery, including shoulder replacement, can expect to return to sports within six months post-operatively, and many experience improvement in their ability to participate in their sports.



**Types of Shoulder Arthroplasty**



## Back to Mr Kalai Vanen

After discussing the various treatment options, Mr Kalai underwent a left total shoulder arthroplasty in 2020 by Prof Andrew Tan. At just one-year post-surgery, he had returned to competing at international para-powerlifting platforms. Mr Kalai is currently three years post-surgery and has regained great function to his shoulder. He hopes to continue participating in future para-powerlifting events, and continues to be an inspiration to many generations of para-athletes and athletes.

His sheer desire to rise above adversity and to continue to compete at the top level brought him back to the international powerlifting arena within a year after surgery. He has since represented Singapore in various competitions around the world, and in December 2023, won 3 gold medals at the World AbilitySport Games.

*"As I have said to him many times, he is indeed an inspiration to many, including me, reminding us that it is not what happens to you, but how you respond to it that defines you and your life."*  
- Prof Andrew Tan.

**Mr Kalai's Shoulder -  
Pre Surgery**



**Mr Kalai's Shoulder -  
Post Surgery**

