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# SURVIVING THE SPIDER: A LESSON IN WORKPLACE SAFETY

Miscommunication and insufficient training on a work site can have dire consequences particularly when working with large access equipment. Cranes & Access' Imogen Campion talks to Joni Vepsäläinen about a life-changing incident that could have easily been avoided.

**I first met Joni Vepsäläinen rock climbing in Laos, South East Asia, earlier this year. After climbing with him on several occasions he shared his story with me about a life altering injury he'd suffered whilst working with a spider lift.**

Joni had a very prominent scar covering the entirety of his left calf. Curious, I asked about its origin. In March 2018, Joni, 29 at the time, a Finnish rope access technician and aerial lift operator from Helsinki, was working on a window cleaning job when he was run over and trapped by a six tonne, 30 metre spider lift, crushing his left leg beneath its tracks.

The spider operator - who was 20 - was driving the lift from the remote controller - dog walking as it is sometimes referred to - having completed his training just two weeks earlier. The incident occurred when Joni and his colleague were moving the spider lift into position to clean the higher windows on an office block.

Joni had walked ahead of the spider to lift a car park barrier to allow the platform to pass through. The operator, moving along behind the lift did not see him and presumed it was safe to drive the lift forwards before receiving confirmation. In doing so, Joni was caught by the machine as it turned, knocking him to the ground and pinning him under the tracks.

He attributes the fact that he didn't lose his foot to the quality of his work boots. "The lift was on top of me for between 30 seconds and at least a minute until he was able to move it off me," he recalled. "My colleague began to panic and was going into shock so I had to yell and tell him to call an ambulance."

Despite the magnitude of the trauma, he says he wasn't in pain which he believes was due to the adrenalin. An ambulance arrived within five minutes of being called and he was rushed to hospital where they put his dislocated knee back into place, inserted a titanium rod in his shin, and secured multiple bolts throughout his fractured lower leg. The extent of the injuries were severe, with his tibia, fibula and seven bones in his feet shattered, as well as his leg being grotesquely torn open.

"I was in hospital for four weeks, I did four months of physio and finally began working again seven months later. I got bored in hospital, I was looking forward to getting out and back to my hobbies and work. I kept my strength for rock climbing through focusing on upper body strength



*The spider in question*



and worked on my balance through slack lining despite having a cast on my leg."

He did not let the injury deter him and has been rock climbing for 13 years taking up the activity barely four months after the incident. He is now climbing at a technical grade equal to where he was before the injury but says it still prevents him from doing certain exercises such as running.

"I have been working with cranes since 2014 and spider lifts since 2016 and have always known the risks that come with operating large equipment, but I was used to working alone or with others who had more experience."

## HELPING OTHERS

"The incident with the parking barrier was something I did not expect, my colleague simply didn't communicate with me," he says.

Despite enduring severe injuries and undergoing extensive rehabilitation, he has not only resumed his professional duties but also taken on the responsibility of training others in safety protocols and effective communication in the access industry. His experience serves as a reminder of the critical importance of thorough training, clear communication, and vigilance when operating heavy machinery, ultimately emphasising the value of prioritising safety in any workplace.

Joni's journey from a life altering accident to his remarkable recovery and return to rock climbing showcases his strength of character and passion for his work. He still works with spider lifts at the same company, Suomen kiipeilytekniikka, in Helsinki, which specialises in construction, property maintenance, and window cleaning. ■



*Joni Vepsäläinen*

