



News

NRL star Mitchell Pearce talks about overcoming his alcohol addiction

**NRL**

## Mitchell Pearce: 'You don't need to drink everyday to go seek help'

David Riccio, Chief Sports Writer, The Sunday Telegraph  
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Two years ago, Mitchell Pearce's glittering NRL career was on the verge of being crushed by controversy.

Now Newcastle's \$1 million dollar man has become a voice for change — producing a bold and powerful message about alcohol addiction, his stint in a Thai rehabilitation clinic and why he's willing to guide other NRL stars towards seeking help.

“The thing is, you don't need to have a needle in your arm and be on heroin, or binge-drink, or drink every day, to go and seek the help,” Pearce said.

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“For me, the biggest thing was taking responsibility of weaknesses and address things to become a better person.”



Mitchell Pearce in action for the Newcastle Knights. Picture: Darren Pateman  
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In the wake of an alcohol-fuelled 2016 Australia Day video which involved a lewd act with a dog and went viral on social media, Pearce was fined an NRL record \$125,000 and suspended for eight matches.

It was a crushing blow to his immediate playing career with his former club the Sydney Roosters. Yet now the 29-year-old is using his story for positive change.

Providing a confronting and detailed account of the period that rocked his life, Pearce has produced a video story about his addictive personality and rehabilitation process to be aired at a major sporting summit of the biggest codes in Australian sport in Sydney and Melbourne next week.

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Called 'After The Game: Addiction in Sports', the summit is being facilitated by The Cabin, the world-renowned Thailand rehab-facility where Pearce spent a month, breaking from denial and understanding his temptation towards alcohol.



Pearce spent a month at The Cabin rehab facility in Chiang Mai, Thailand.



It was at The Cabin where Mitchell realised he had a serious problem with alcohol.

“The flight over there, I had a lot of doubt and anticipation and denial, for why I was going to The Cabin,” Pearce said.

“I didn’t really know what my problems were with alcohol at the time.

“The tip of the iceberg was a drama that happened in Sydney created a big media storm and put a lot of worry for the people close to me and my family.

“I was a young guy who always enjoyed a beer.

“Binge-drinking has been a big part of the (rugby league) culture and something that I’d thoroughly enjoyed as a kid.

“(But) it was the erratic behaviour that came with binge drinking, with chasing temptation, which was the main thing for me which was an issue.

“It wasn’t until that I went to The Cabin that I (knew I) belonged there.

“And that denial that I spoke about, was something that was a lack of understanding, of myself.”

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Pearce greeted by his mother Terri at Sydney airport after returning from his stint in rehabilitation. Picture: Gregg Porteous

Initially shocked to be waking each day inside The Cabin clinic alongside alcoholics and drug addicts, Pearce said the course provided him with both the counselling and coping mechanisms of which to help him counter his temptations.

“I matured a lot,” Pearce said.

“The biggest thing after The Cabin that I’ve taken into my every day life is more knowledge and intelligence around the mind and the psychology around temptations and drinking alcohol and the escapes we use as humans.

“There’s all different extremes of addiction or temptation, but the biggest thing I’ve learnt from the cabin is what to use when you do feel yourself slipping.

**“The thing is, you don’t need to have a needle in your arm and be on heroin, or binge-drink, or drink every day, to go and seek the help”**

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“That’s the biggest thing I’ve learnt from my time there and from conversations since I’ve come back with good counsellors and psychologists involved in The Cabin that are always there to help.

“It’s about having the knowledge to know your own patterns, your own character and your slipping points.

“At the end of the day, it gives you a better way to live life with more happiness and purpose.

“Coming back and speaking to a lot of other mates that may be going through a similar thing, that we think aren’t an actual problem, (knowing the problems) are eating away at you, for me that was the biggest thing that I got out of The Cabin.



Pearce with mates on holiday in Bali. Picture: Instagram

“It’s no secret that for young people today, whether in sport or any profession, mental health is a really a big issue.

“There is no magic wand, I am always going to be vulnerable and there is always temptation, but for me it’s about finding the balance and understanding that there is no such thing as a quick fix.”

According to a leading US sports psychiatrist Dr Tim Benson, elite athletes are more susceptible to addiction than the general public,

Dr Benson has worked as a medical consultant for two of the world's biggest sporting organisations, the NBA and NFL, over the past 10 years.

He has witnessed first-hand the increased risk of mental health issues and rate of alcohol and prescription drug addiction related to athletes.

“The biggest thing I have seen in athletes, is they cross a threshold where they're thrust into a world where there's a significant amount of pressure,” Dr Benson told The Sunday Telegraph.

“They also have an increased level of visibility as well as an increased level of scrutiny.

“Those combining together, really pose the question for people to figure out how to cope with these things. And some of those things are unhealthy ways.



Pearce with mates at the Omnia Dayclub, in Bali. Picture: Instagram

“A lot of the addictions I treat in athletes are really a symptom of an inability to cope with some of the challenges which are inherent in high-level sports.”

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Dr Benson is in Sydney this week to host an addiction in sport summit on Thursday.

He will discuss America's opioid overdose crisis — which is resulting in more than 115 people in the US dying each day from prescription pain relievers, heroin and synthetic opioids such as fentanyl — and its impact on athletes, while also highlighting the connection between concussion and mental health issues.

Dr Benson added that the power of athletes — including NRL star Mitchell Pearce — speaking publicly about addiction was tangible.

“The result of athletes coming forward to tell their story has been very impactful because when you have an athlete, or hero, or someone who is looked up to, admit to having some of these problems, what it does is really open the door for other people to come forward,” he said.

“It lowers the threshold for people to discuss mental health issues.

“We associate mental health challenges with weakness.

“But now you see these powerful men and women coming forward, saying ‘regardless of how talented I am, I’ve got these challenges’.”

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