



Peter Eccles saw himself as a dedicated and conscientious farm manager and hardworking rugby teammate. When both came to an end, he found himself having something of an identity crisis.

Now, after opening his own on-farm fitness business and getting involved in supporting the wellbeing organisation Farmstrong Scotland, he opens up about finding his new sense of purpose.

Moving home to take over the reins at his family farm Carlaverock, following the retirement of his father, was something Peter had been preparing for his whole career.

However, he wasn't quite expecting how challenging a move this would be.

Back in 2020, Peter, a former back row forward for Heriot's and then Melrose, who also achieved Club International honours, was named as the winner of the prestigious Farmers Weekly Farm Manager of the Year Award, for his work at Saughland Farm, Midlothian.

He also took the overall title of Farmer of the Year.

"People would mostly talk to me about rugby and farming," explains 40-year-old Peter.

"Following the end of my rugby playing days and my decision to leave my role as a farm manager I went through a tough time where I struggled mentally to find my new purpose."

"I was at a stage in my life where I felt it was important to pursue my dreams and build something for myself. Farming is my passion and something I continue to do, but I've chosen to diversify and create an additional revenue stream to the farm's income which can be so volatile."

"It has been a challenging time transitioning out of my role as a farmer manager, becoming a qualified personal trainer and starting my own business. I've had to adapt since leaving a job with all the security of a monthly salary and a tied home for my young family."

As is so often the case in farming today, successful diversification can be key in safeguarding the future of the family farm.

"I had been looking at the farm's assets, what it already had, and kept coming back to the idea of repurposing the older buildings. Exercise and routine, along with the social side of sport, had been such a huge part of my rugby playing days. When this ended, I found myself adrift and feeling low and without a real sense of purpose. Then I joined a local Crossfit gym and started training again regularly and making new connections with people too. This helped me massively, giving my mood and energy levels such a boost."

"This inspired me to want to start my own gym back home on the farm. I wanted to help others start their fitness journey and begin building a community of people who enjoy coming to the farm for regular workouts with a twist. So that's what I have created. I've called it Fitness Farmyard and it opened in late autumn

last year. Whilst juggling the gym alongside both farm work and family can be stressful at times, it's exciting and the gym has huge potential for growth. I've recently brought in two more personal trainers and together we are exploring ways to enable parents to exercise alongside their children. They also get to visit the farm too and learn a bit more about where food actually comes from."

The Eccles family farm stands at 250 acres, with 140 acres owned and the remainder rented. The farm grows 200 acres of cereals on a contract farming agreement while Peter manages his own herd of pedigree Hereford cattle and a few crossbred sheep.

"Under the prefix Rockness, I sell breeding bulls and heifers from the herd, but we also have some of our own grass finished beef and lamb processed too, which is a story in itself. It's for family and our growing fitness community's consumption only!" Peter says with a smile. The gym currently runs a mix of HIIT (High Intensity Interval Training) and Hybrid strength and endurance training classes, with classes starting at 6.30am in the morning five days per week while evening classes also take place two or three days per week. Peter fits in livestock work and his own training in-between.

"We have a great mix of folk coming along and of all ages, from 16-year-olds to those in their 60's, and we cater for all levels of fitness and experience too" comments Peter. A further contributing factor to Peter, who still struggles at times to maintain his positive outlook, came following a diagnosis of osteoarthritis in both his hips.



"I have at least one hip replacement coming - which is probably a result of knocks on the rugby pitch and perhaps not taking my post-match recovery as seriously as I should have done. Though it is amazing how much of my mobility I have managed to maintain through careful selection of exercise and daily stretching."

The challenges Peter faces are not uncommon in sport or in farming and he has found solace in learning from others' experiences.

"Moving away from playing competitive sport or being unable to farm the way they used is something a lot of people can find tough. Often it is the thing they love most and have done since they were a child. I think my original way of coping was just to retract myself, stop going to things to avoid speaking about it, but I found myself feeling increasingly lost and without an identity to hang to my hat. It's been great for me to get this interaction and connection with people back again now that I have Fitness Farmyard and from speaking at Farmstrong events."

"I think farmers put a lot of pressure on themselves in keeping up appearances, both in their work and in themselves, and I am no exception. I want to build something I can be proud of and enjoy the benefits of its success."

explains Peter, who is planning a charity cycle ride to raise funds for Farmstrong as a way of raising awareness and acknowledging the help the wellbeing movement has been to him.

"I got back on track by learning more about myself and reevaluating my priorities, such as my family and the importance of managing my mental health and physical fitness" says Peter.

"A big part of my farming ethos is trying to be as efficient as possible. I look to take time off for strategic thinking and forward planning which may help me cut out an unnecessary job and give me even more time back.

"For me getting out on my gravel bike is time well spent. It's where I do my best thinking. But that could also just be taking an afternoon off to go for a walk or enjoy time doing another hobby. Everyone is different so any time spent doing something which contributes to supporting better mental and physical wellbeing is time well spent."

Peter, who spoke at a Farmstrong Walk and Talk event in 2024 and more recently at a pre-match farmers lunch at Melrose Rugby club, believes the simple tips and suggestions given by the wellbeing organisation have really helped him.

"Following the osteoarthritis diagnosis I struggled physically and mentally and lacked the knowledge, skills and motivation to do anything about it, becoming increasingly unhappy and demoralised," he recalls.

"During the Covid-19 pandemic I discovered podcasts. On listening to real stories of those who'd overcome their difficulties to conquer extreme challenges, I was inspired to get moving again and experienced a shift in mindset.

"Now there is Farmstrong in place I feel the whole farming and crofting community is so lucky to have it. There is so much advice and inspiration available on its website and it now even has its own podcasts and song playlists. It's a fantastic resource and continues to further its reach with local Farmstrong community and social groups forming and organising social events all around Scotland."

"My hope is to meet and connect with as many farmers and people in agriculture along the way," explains Peter, with some overnight accommodation kindly being offered by farming families. "I welcome all who may wish to join me for a stint along the way to talk, walk, cycle, have coffee...no matter how brief or fleeting, your support will be greatly appreciated. I have also set up a Just Giving page for people to make donations through."

"Having been through a tough spot mentally, I'm always happy to share what helped me get back on track. This is one of the great things about Farmstrong, it's a peer-to-peer programme where people share what has worked for them.

"If one person or family can benefit from Farmstrong as a result of this cycle ride or hearing about my story then it will have been worthwhile. It will also be great to raise some money for Farmstrong as well which can go towards further strengthening their resources and reach. While this ride will challenge me both physically, mentally and organisationally, I'm also looking forward to a few days off and meeting some new folk on my tour up and over some of Scotland's most scenic landscapes."



Trio & Tested: Three simple steps that helped Pete Eccles on the path to better wellbeing.

- Finding a sense of identity that reflects your current life - "People would generally always talk to me about rugby and farming – I've always felt there is much more for me to discover."
- Factor in time away from the farm - "For me it's getting out on my bike, exercising or spending time with family and friends doing something active. Farmers, in general, should recognise this can be beneficial to their business and is time well spent."
- Try listening to podcasts - "I was inspired to get moving again and experienced a shift in mindset after listening directly from those who'd overcome their difficulties to conquer some extreme challenges."part of a group, it can be helpful in lots of ways.

www.farmstrongscotland.co.uk