



The

# grave!

Crashes may be an inevitable part of racing, but the physical damage done has reduced over the years thanks to safety advances. However, broken bones are still a familiar outcome of an off, as **MIKE NORMAN** knows only too well



snap

In motorcycle racing, when a rider crashes a bike, it can very often be completely destroyed. A serious privateer Superbike can usually cost tens of thousands of dollars to build. A factory effort Superbike or MotoGP machine costs more than most upper-end homes. Yet, if a rider makes a misfortunate calculation and ends up with the bike cart wheeling down the track, it's like watching a bank go up in smoke. It's truly a sad sight, one that gives most enthusiasts a chill. But that's not even the highest cost at stake here. What about the rider? Have you ever watched one get thrown over the high-side at over 130mph, only to cartwheel himself down the track in a horrific display of unplanned acrobatics? With each impact comes a new injury as he tumbles, slides and pounds his way down the track surface, or into the gravel traps praying for the softest impact possible into the crash wall. In some cases, the bike has been known to chase the rider and collide into him once or twice along the way. To see these riders stand up after a high-speed crash is just amazing. To watch them get back on a bike again within minutes or hours is truly super-human. A mere mortal would go lay in pain, begging for some heavy-duty pain killers. I tried to be more than a mere mortal one time. It was almost the biggest mistake of my life.

When I was 17, I told my mother I was going to race motorcycles. "You're going to break your neck" she shrieked. But, she allowed it and supported me in my seemingly crazy decision. Just after winning my third Novice race at Willow Springs Raceway and being promoted to "expert" status, I was in the first Sunday morning practice on an -8°C day. I was easy around the track for about five laps trying to get a feel for the tyres. Then, Kent Kunitsugu, the reigning fast guy at that time, blasted up the inside of me with one knee in the dirt. Figuring I could hang with him, I turned up the heat only to find myself with the back end completely stepped out, rear tyre spinning and smoking and the entire right side of my body dragging on the ground.

At around 120mph, I knew this was about to be a bad high-side. I thought, "Stay on the gas.

Don't let go". The next thing I remember was flying through the air, looking my friend in the eyes as he was trying to avoid hitting me thinking, "this isn't really happening". I hit the ground so hard the wind was knocked out of me. I couldn't breathe as I continued to tumble and slide off the racetrack. Sky. Dirt. Sky. Dirt. Sky. Dirt. Sky. I wasn't sure I would ever stop tumbling or sliding. It lasted for what seemed like an eternity, but in reality was maybe only 15 or 20 seconds. When I finally did stop, I had to lay there for a long time to make sure I really had stopped, and to catch my breath again. I remember the ground was so cold my entire body felt numb. My hands hurt so badly from smacking the ground repeatedly the pain was almost unbearable.

When the ambulance came, I sat up and stuck my hands in the exhaust pipe to try and warm them up. The medical crew thought I had a head injury because of that. When I tried to stand up and walk to my bike, they were trying to escort me over to the gurney and into the ambulance. All I cared about was if the bike was okay and if I could still race. The medical crew was now convinced I had a head injury. I am sure that head injury was there before I even started racing. Probably all the years of skateboarding and surfing pounded the



This X-ray shows a plate in the author's neck following a crash



common sense out of me. Maybe that was what made me crazy enough to even consider racing in the first place.

### The road to recovery

When I got back to the pits, I was scrambling through my spares trying to get the bike up and running again for my first expert race that morning. Much to my disappointment, I was not able to get the bike back together. There were just enough broken parts, and not enough spares, that it felt like the end of the world. As the day went on and I watched my friends race, the real pain started to sink in. I was so pumped on adrenaline earlier, I didn't think I was hurt. As we loaded the van and made the three-hour drive back home, things inside me started to feel very odd. I remember walking through the living room carrying my damaged fairings past my mom. The look in her eyes said more than any words as she realized I had actually crashed. But, it wasn't until the next morning that the real horror began.

When I woke up, I was unable to feel or move my legs. The rest of my body hurt like a huge cargo truck was parked on top of me. I was rushed to the hospital to find I had broken my back. Two Lumbar vertebrae (L4 and L5) had compressive fractures and the disc was completely herniated into the spinal cord. I also had a broken bone in my foot and another in my hand. Here I was, 18 years old just having started my new-found love for racing, and I had doctors telling me I had

a 30% chance of ever walking again. Now the nightmare had just become a reality.

After many weeks of aggressive traction and physical therapy I was able to walk out of the hospital on my own two feet (even though they were trying to make me ride out in a wheelchair). I was more than lucky. By the act of a miracle, I beat the odds. In the next few months out of the hospital I tried to ride again, but the pain was intense. But, more so, the fear of ending up back in that bed permanently was too frightful. Still, I couldn't stay away from the race track. I ended up rebuilding my bike, and sponsoring other promising up-and-coming racers with it, and me as their crew chief. It was the start of a new career for me after all. I just didn't know where this adventure was taking me.

Through the years, I missed riding so much. I had been building bikes, more specifically engines, that were winning championships and setting lap records, and I never got to experience any of them. The urge to race would come and go, but with each new race season, as I understood what I did wrong to cause my crash, I decided it was time to return to the track. When I was 34, I started racing again "just for fun". I managed to race for four seasons, fairly competitively including winning two four-hour endurance races, without falling once. But, due to many other factors, I had to stop again. I always thought I would come back soon but, now I am in my 40s, and that time has still not come.

### Damaged goods

During this second non-racing period I have broken multiple bones in both hands, both my wrists and an elbow. These accidents occurred on a mountain bike, or car accident or just horsing around in a go-kart. Then, just a few years ago, I was having trouble with pain, numbness and weakness in my upper body, only to find a ruptured disc now pressing against the spinal cord in my neck. I underwent a very intense surgery to remove the offending disc and fuse the vertebrae together about two years ago. The morning after 



the surgery, the doctor told me my neck was broken. For how long, he couldn't tell me. So, after all the years of my mother swearing that I would break my neck, it turned out she was right. I will never know what it was that actually broke my neck, but I will always be fearful of doing it again. The sad reality is, I should never race again.

Nowadays, when I attend events that are not racing-related, I am shocked at how much attention I get for all the damage I have done to my body. Most people say, "Wow, you're crazy" or, "That's just suicide, wouldn't a gun be faster?" But, when I am with my motorcycle industry friends and colleagues, I am surrounded by people who not only understand, they share in much of the pain. Everyone has at least one "war story" and most have multiple scars to accompany their stories. When we all walk into a meeting, there is usually one person who is on crutches and several people with permanent limps. It almost goes un-noticed it seems so common-place to us.

Getting injured is a risk we all are well aware of before we even started riding. Although, some people are in denial, figuring it will happen to someone

else, not them. These are the people whose lives get affected the worst when things do unfortunately go horribly wrong. Truly understanding the risks and accepting what life could be like afterwards are mandatory for anyone contemplating even an amateur shot at racing. If there is one thing I always tell people getting started in racing, it is to have a back-up plan for life after racing.

Most racers that I know fall, get hurt, and are trying to figure out how to get back to the track while they are being transported to the hospital. Although a lot of them are just in shock, the majority of them are back on track the day they are medically released to do so – some sooner than that. Of the racers I know that did get seriously hurt, none were prepared for the life of recovery that awaited them afterwards. Sadly, our group just lost someone who wasn't able to cope with his paralysis after a horrible racing accident. This is truly the saddest loss I have known personally.

### The need for speed

So, what is it that drives us to put ourselves in such risk for serious injuries? What is it that pushes us to continue to race even after an injury? Do we think about the pains and handicaps we will have later in life? I know I certainly didn't. But, would it have changed anything for me if I had? It's highly unlikely in my case. Motorcycle racing brought me new levels of excitement, leading me to conquer new challenges that I never would

have imagined, and appreciate life at limits that most people seem scared to even imagine, let alone try. For me, there are truly no regrets.

As I said earlier, I might be considered lucky in the scope of injuries and remaining handicaps, but what about those who have suffered debilitating injuries that have changed their lives permanently from that day forward. AMA Superbike Champion Bubba Shobert suffered severe brain injuries during a crash on the cool-down lap at Laguna Seca in 1989 during his inaugural 500cc GP Season. Three-time 500cc GP Champion Wayne Rainey remains permanently paralyzed from the chest down from injuries sustained at Misano in 1993. AMA Racer Vincent Haskovec was also



paralyzed in a crash at Infineon Raceway back in 2005. Haskovec had only just begun his career as a professional bike racer, having moved to the USA from the Czech Republic in the late 1990s to pursue his life-long dream to race motorcycles. These are just a few of the more known riders who were tragically injured while doing what they loved.

I have a much longer list of friends I watched come up in the amateur ranks to become excellent racers, only to be unexpectedly stopped short before anyone ever knew their names. These racers tried to follow their passions, just like everyone else, only to now spend the rest of their lives remembering how fast they "could have been". Many of these



people have re-focused the skills they learned on the track, along with the passion and determination that made them excellent racers to begin with, to be very successful in their lives. Some of them regret having every tried racing. But, most feel the way I do – it's better to have tasted the experience than to have only watched from the sidelines.

