

This article was written on spec for *ESPN: The Magazine*. Ricky is the most courageous teenager I ever met.

“LIFE ROLLS ON” The Ricky James Story

Back in the sixties, Paul Simon wrote “Where have you gone Joe DiMaggio? A nation turns its lonely eyes to you.” Some forty years later, heroes are even harder to find. In our 24/7, “look at me!” culture, try separating the wheat from the chaff.

But every so often the genuine article rides into town.

Meet Ricky James - an 18-year-old Motocross rider, from Murrieta, CA. Ricky recently competed in the Baja 500 - a hellish, twelve hour, off road relay race over Mexico’s version of the Badlands. Not all that heroic. Except for one thing. Ricky is a paraplegic - riding in a sport that absolutely demands the use of one’s legs for balance and strength. No one’s ever done it - or even considered it. No one, that is, before Ricky James.

But this story really begins two years ago.

At 16, Ricky was a budding star on the Motocross circuit, with unlimited potential. He had already signed to drive professionally for Team Honda. With the future looking bright, Ricky and his parents, Rick Sr. and Tina, drove out to Texas for his first national race.

The race started off normally. And then? The unthinkable! A freak accident. With Ricky negotiating a fairly routine turn, another rider miscalculated his maneuver. The two collided, and Ricky was hurled off his bike, head first. The awkward position and sheer force of the landing were unforgiving. Unable to feel his legs, he lay on the ground. His father raced to his aid. Calmly, Ricky’s first words to his father were, “I’m paralyzed, dad.”

But hope was not lost. Ricky was rushed to the hospital. After seven hours of surgery, hope and prayer, the doctor emerged with the news. It was devastating. Ricky was now a paraplegic from the chest down.

End of story? Hardly. For true heroes, it’s just the beginning!

Months of difficult rehab in Texas and California facilities would follow. Ricky finally returned home to his new life. But armed with a powerful weapon - his old attitude. There was no time for self pity. Ricky just blew past the five stages of grief. Not content with just “acceptance,” Ricky attacked this new phase of his life with the same zeal that he had every other. He was determined to become a world class paraplegic.

In my first meeting with Ricky and his family about nine months ago, Rick Sr. was talking about the incredible strides being made in spinal cord research. Strides that are on the verge of historic breakthroughs. Ricky's response to his father was, "I hope they don't find a cure too soon. I've still got a lot to accomplish as a paraplegic." I'll let that sink in for a moment.

The real possibility of Ricky walking again is no longer the stuff of science fiction. The James family is heavily invested, both emotionally and monetarily, in the Reeve-Irvine Research Center at UC Irvine in California.

Two of the world's leading researchers in spinal cord injuries are headquartered there. Hans Keirstead and Oswald Steward are on the brink of medical discoveries that could cure spinal cord paralysis in years - not decades. And Ricky's particular injury falls into a category of great promise for them.

"It's a whole new era," Rick Sr. said. "Stem cell research is the key. It's opening doors that, until now, have been closed. We're so close, but we need additional funding. With the federal government dragging its feet, private donations are now more vital than ever."

Ricky's sentiments can be summed up in just one sentence. "I *know* I'll walk again."

Given Ricky's attitude, it should come as no surprise that the following scene took place. About four months after the accident, Ricky was in the garage. He was sitting in his wheelchair, next to his motorcycle. (Ricky insisted they keep it.) He had a pad and paper in his hand. He was drawing a diagram of a retrofitted cycle.

Rick Sr. walked in and asked what Ricky was drawing. Ricky showed his father the diagram and said, "I think I can ride again." Understandably, Rick Sr.'s first reaction was a definitive, "No way!" The possibility of further injury was just too real. No one had even considered this before. It was flat out crazy.

But two things you have to remember. One, Ricky and his father are mirror images. It's Rick Sr.'s love of motorcycles that flows in Ricky's veins. It's an unspoken passion for the sport that most people, including myself, will never understand. And, two, Ricky can be pretty persuasive when he wants to. He's not your average teenager.

Fighting his own guilt and fears, Rick Sr. asked, "You're serious, aren't you?" Ricky's face said it all. With that, Rick Sr. leaned the bike up against the wall, started it up, and left it idling. He then lifted Ricky onto the bike and taped down his legs. Ricky conceivably could ride, but certainly couldn't stop. With Ricky strapped in, Rick Sr. put the bike in second gear. And Ricky took off. He was just supposed to go to the end of the driveway and back, where his father would catch him. Fat chance.

Once Ricky saw that street - he was gone. Rick Sr. was freaking out. He ran to the bottom of the driveway and the next thing he sees is Ricky cruising back down the street ó popping a wheelie! Ricky finally came back to the garage, and was helped off the bike by his father. They both looked at each other in a way that only a father and son can. Only two words were uttered by Rick Sr. - "Game on!"

Ricky's mom, Tina, wasn't as enthusiastic. "As a parent, I was always nervous when Ricky rode. Even before the accident. So, it was hard for me to even consider Ricky riding again. But when I saw that smile on my son's face I couldn't take that away from him."

Over the next six months, Ricky and his dad would work out a design for a modified bike that would allow Ricky to use nothing but hand controls. Not unlike the special hand controls used in cars. The goal was to allow Ricky to ride recreationally, and participate in a select few events near his home. A moment of particular triumph occurred exactly one year to the day after Ricky's accident. The James family returned to the Texas track where Ricky was paralyzed. To the utter disbelief of the crowd, Ricky rode a symbolic "victory" lap around the track.

Around that time, someone suggested that Ricky consider riding in the Baja 500 - the Mount Everest of off road racing. The course is strewn with the broken hearts of the able bodied men who just couldn't cut it. Everyone's reaction to this utterly outrageous suggestion was predictable. Everyone, that is, except Ricky. Game on.

Cut to: Ensenada, Mexico - June 2, 2007 ó 4AM: Ricky and his parents pile into the pickup and head out for the start of the race. I would accompany them all day. It's dawn when Ricky arrives at the starting line. Waiting there is Danny Velasquez, a local Ensenada rider who would shadow Ricky for his entire 120 mile leg of the race.

They are both equipped with cell phones and GPS devices. Nothing was being left to chance. Ricky's safety was paramount. The goal was not to win. Clearly, that was not an option. The goal was more immediate. Just complete Ricky's leg of the race.

The start went off without a hitch. Ricky and Danny faded out of sight. Over the next four hours, Rick Sr., Tina and I hurriedly drove to designated areas where the off road trails crossed the normal, paved roadways. After the first checkpoint, (19 mile marker) there was concern. Ricky's bike crossed the road, but Danny's bike didn't follow. Was Danny not able to keep up? Who would help Ricky if he fell? Same scenario at the 43 mile marker. More concern. Where was Danny?

By the third checkpoint (mile 70) the concern turned to fear. All of the bikes in Ricky's group had passed. But this time - no sign of Ricky. He was now a half hour overdue. With the mountainous terrain, the cell phones proved useless. Had he crashed? Was he in danger? Where was Danny? It was unbearable! Finally! Ricky and Danny pulled up for a pit stop. The sense of relief was palpable. They were still in the race.

But why so late? Through no fault of his own, Ricky had collided with another rider, who tried to cut Ricky off. The spill was so bad that Ricky dislocated his left shoulder, and was in excruciating pain. He was stranded on the road, helpless and unable to right himself. Finally, Danny who was a few minutes behind, showed up. Should they even try to go on?

Ricky was determined to continue. But Danny was unable to get Ricky's bike back up. The weight of both the bike and Ricky was just too much for one person. After numerous failed attempts, Ricky was unstrapped from the bike. Danny righted the bike and lifted Ricky back on. He then strapped Ricky back in and they resumed riding. But this was no longer a joyride. With each bump in the road, Ricky's shoulder would painfully pop in and out of its socket.

Upon reaching the checkpoint, Ricky's first comments to his father were, "It's my shoulder, Dad. I'm done." But as bike after bike kept passing Ricky, his primal juices just kicked in. Would he ever have this chance again? And all those people who said he couldn't do it.

"I'm gonna finish" were the next words out of his mouth. And while everyone was pondering the sanity of this, Ricky just flipped down his goggles and took off! Game on! Danny quickly followed. There was nothing anyone could do, but just head to the final checkpoint at mile 120 and pray.

Forget the pain. Ricky was now riding the last fifty miles with only one fully functioning limb!

We arrived at the last checkpoint, and met up with the pit crew. Bike after bike passed. Still no sign of Ricky. Rick Sr. nervously looked at his watch. Time dragged on. You could cut the tension with a knife.

Finally over the hill, two bikes came into view. Could it be them? Then, the bright yellow helmet that Ricky wore could be seen. Sure enough, it was them. Ricky pulled up. As he removed his goggles, the pain on his face was so overwhelming, I could feel it in my own body. His helmet was removed. Hugs from both his parents.

And then, ever so slowly a Cheshire grin formed around Ricky's mouth. That special smile his mother lives for. At that moment, time stood still. The magnitude of what Ricky just pulled off quietly washed over us. Heroic? Jolting? Joe would've been proud.

But there were no camera crews from ESPN. No throngs of cheering fans. No trophy. No speeches. Just an astounded pit crew. A humbled reporter. And two enormously proud parents.

Some would call what Ricky did foolish. And they'd have a point. But if it weren't for those "fools," we would've never landed a man on the moon. Or built the Golden Gate Bridge. Or even discovered America. Those "fools" are ultimately our heroes. And those heroes - are not just the able-bodied.

Just ask Jim Abbott, who was born without a right hand. On Sept. 4, 1993, he pitched a no-hitter for the New York Yankees. Or Erik Weihenmayer, who climbed Mt. Everest ó blind! Or Beethoven, who wrote perhaps the greatest music ever ó deaf!

For heroes like Ricky James, paralysis isn't a handicap. It's just a golden opportunity. To turn lemons into caviar.

And for those of you who think that Ricky will never walk again ó do you really want to bet against this guy? Game on!