



FULL CIRCLE

ON THE DASHBOARD OF **NIKI URWIN'S** HOLDEN COMMODORE SS UTE IS A STICKER IN BOLD BLACK WRITING WITH A SIMPLE SLOGAN: "**RIDE RACE LIVE**". IN 28 EVENTFUL YEARS, NIKI'S DONE ALL THREE - THE RIDING, THE RACING AND A DRAMATIC FIGHT FOR LIFE. NOW HE'S COME FULL CIRCLE.

Story: Vanessa Quin Photography: Richard Cullwick



FOUR YEARS AGO the professional Tauranga motocross rider was left paralysed in a racing accident and it was touch and go whether he would survive. The ensuing battle to beat death left him with a fierce determination to once again dominate in an elite sport. Now, in only his third season racing karts, flying at dramatic speeds inches above the ground, he has already outperformed everyone's expectations - including his own.

On a dusty August day in the small coastal town of Wonthaggi, Australia, Niki Urwin's life changed forever. He was a 23-year-old with six New Zealand titles, racing for Team Kawasaki at a round of the Australian thumper nationals, and making a big impact in a sport that had been his passion for 19 years. Just that morning, things had got infinitely better, with his future seemingly secured on a rival bike over at Team Suzuki. Life as he knew it was perfect.

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"I was standing at race briefing when Jay Foreman, the team Suzuki manager, came up and asked me if I had anything sorted for next year. When I said I didn't, he told me I had better come in to Suzuki headquarters on Monday before flying home and we would sort something out," Niki recalls. "Jay is the king of understatement so I knew this meant I had a ride for next year.

Suzuki was the best team around then and I had already done a year with Jay and the team before switching to Kawasaki so for me it was going to be the homecoming I was waiting for."

Then it all came crashing down.

In his third race of the day, battling with the front runners, he lost control of the front end of his bike and slid out on the dirt track.

He was still holding onto the throttle - trying to keep the engine alive - when another rider smashed into him, striking him square in the back and exploding his chest cavity. Niki was paralysed instantly and in big trouble. A mad rush to get him help followed. Things were so grim that within 24 hours, Niki lost all his vital signs and was technically dead on the operating table.

"The first thing the doctors said was that my spinal injury was not a concern to them. They said - That's it, you're paralysed, but we are here to save your life".

TRYING NOT TO DIE

His left lung was completely severed from his windpipe and doctors worked frantically to re-attach it. Complicating matters further, Niki had also punctured his right lung in two places, broken all his ribs and was bleeding internally into his chest and abdomen. With a less than five percent chance of survival, surgery was undertaken in conference with doctors in America. No-one had ever survived the procedure before and after being revived six times during the lengthy six-hour operation, Niki was given the all clear.

And it is motocross he believes saved his life.

"Everything I've learnt about survival, I've learnt on the track. They're the things that make you tougher in your brain and that's how you get through. I was just so scared of dying, it was never about trying to live - it was just trying not to die", he said. "Motocross was everything. It was my life and when you look back, you have got to be thankful for those 19 years. I loved everything about it. I loved the physicality of it, I loved the skill, I loved being able to do things on a motorcycle only a handful of people in the world could do. I loved being able to take a piece of machinery and make it dance just using your hands and feet."

While only an afterthought at the time of the accident, Niki's shattered back soon became the major issue for him to deal with.

Paralysed from the chest down, he would spend the next year re-learning everything from getting dressed to taking a shower. But he set a goal to be home in Tauranga in time for Christmas and once again, his determination came through.

His mum Kay stayed in Melbourne with him over the three months he spent in rehab, while he waited for the all-clear to be given to travel back to New Zealand. She cooked all his meals and continued to be his primary care-giver throughout his recovery.

"Mum was amazing. I never ate one single hospital meal the whole time I was away from home and every night she would bring me lollies and Oreo biscuits. When you break your back, you use an incredible amount of energy recovering so I would get these crazy sugar cravings."

While still in intensive care Niki was worried Kay would react negatively to the sport that had given him so much, so he wrote a message to her on his board; "Don't blame motocross, I loved every minute of it." The second message he wrote was one for his dad Gary, "I guess I'm a go-kart racer now."



MOVING ON

Early on in his motocross career, Niki admits there was a time when he almost gave up two wheels to race on four. He was 14 and already making waves in the junior motocross ranks, but the winning was not happening fast enough for the teenager.

Always in a hurry, he considered making a change to kart racing after test driving a kart at the local track. Clocking some impressive times, he was offered a sponsorship deal to get him started but amid the discussions, it became obvious his heart was still with motocross.

Any immediate plans to take up karting were shelved, although the experience left its mark.

"I'd always had a fascination with car racing from a young age. I learnt to drive in paddocks and pine forests well before I was old enough to drive on the road and I had driven a kart and raced dad's Porsche 911 when I was younger. Even before I finished motocross, I knew I was going to go car racing some day - when I got hurt it made the someday sooner."

Just 14 months after his accident, Niki drove his first club day kart race at Fagan's Valley Raceway, a slick twisting track in the grassy back-blocks of Te Puke. However, the hurdles to overcome weren't just physical. He was told that due to safety reasons, he would never be given an 'A' licence to race at national level. But determined to do so, Niki showed his flair for racing also extended to four wheels and after demonstrating his motorsport skills before officials, it was conferred at a special meeting that an 'A' licence was his.

Within a year of that first race meeting, Niki was lining up on the finals grid of the national Rotax 125 light kart championships. Qualifying in third spot and surrounded by the best kart drivers in New Zealand, vastly more experienced than he, Niki raced to sixth place, the best performance ever by a driver in his rookie season.

It marked a significant journey back to where he had started. "I feel I've come full circle," Niki says. "To be top in motocross in your country and then to break your back - most people thought I'd had my whole life taken away from me. But less than two years down the track, I was on the start line at another national event, in an able-bodied sport. To be right up the front of it in the most competitive class was one of the proudest moments for me. I had a pretty big smile on my face! When you get hurt and stop doing things, a lot of people feel they lose their identity but as soon as I worked out I'm still me, I'm still Niki Urwin, I never felt like I had lost anything. I just feel like a motocrosser who did what they had to do and I think in this world the crime is not getting knocked down, it's not getting back up, so I got back up, and my life has moved on."



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INSEPARABLE TEAM

While a lot has changed for Niki, his relationship with his dad Gary has remained a constant. The two make an inseparable team and it's one factor Niki rates as fundamental to his success. "My dad's been there since day one on my motorbike and day one on karts, through all the highs and lows. If I decide to do anything in this world, I know it's with both my parents' support. I don't have to question it."

Niki and Gary will often be found in the pits of a busy race meeting or at a deserted kart track deep in conversation about the latest changes being made to the kart. It was Gary, part-time mechanic and full-time supporter, who designed the throttle and brake hand controls that have enabled Niki's transition to karts and the pair are constantly testing and modifying. Gary has been working alongside his son since he started racing motocross at just seven, and while the duo make the process of finding speed look easy, Niki says it has been a steep learning curve for both of them.

"In motocross, it was always 90 percent rider and 10 percent machine and the best person would always win. With karts, it's different - it's all about set-up and tuning the kart to the conditions. Dad and I have had to learn a whole new set of rules."

Learning these rules and paying attention to the details is a trait Gary says Niki has had since his early motocross days.

"Niki always looked at a motocross bike and asked how can we make it go faster. Now we do the same with the kart, although it would make my job a lot easier if he didn't!" Gary laughs.

The family ties have always been strong but Niki says since his knock on death's door he has grown to appreciate those ties even more. "I've learnt the value and importance of things. Before I got hurt, I was just so focused on being the best motocross rider I could and everything else was secondary. I enjoy my karting and I really focus on it but now friends and family and loved ones definitely come before karting and that's a pretty big change," Niki says.

"Now, I just enjoy every day and I'm happy getting experience in go-karts but I'm sure in the next two years I will get itchy feet to do something else. I've got to have a passion, something that I can consume myself with and as long as I have that, I feel like I have direction in all parts of my life, you just find a new way of doing things - the book is still only half written". ■