

Aaron Baker

RISING ABOVE

by DC

Nine years ago, former Loretta Lynn's champion Aaron Baker suffered a spinal-cord injury that left him completely paralyzed. After an amazing recovery, he's continuing his rehabilitation through his Rise Above Tour, a cross-country bicycle ride that recently brought him to the front door of Racer X headquarters.

Racer X: Aaron, what brings you to Morgantown? We get a lot of motorcycle folks through here, but not a lot of them are riding bicycles.

Aaron Baker: This is my Rise Above Tour. It's a bicycle tour that's actually the second annual—last year I rode a tandem bicycle from San Diego, California, to St. Augustine, Florida. And this is basically my process of recovery from my spinal-cord injury, which in 1999 I was testing and had an accident and broke my neck, and I was completely paralyzed. For the last nine years I've been dedicating myself completely to my rehabilitation process and to improving the quality of my life.

Before your accident, you were a Loretta Lynn's champion and a top amateur racer.

Yeah, I did some Team Green amateur championship stuff. I'm from central California, so I grew up racing the GFI series, Hollister Hills.... Actually, here in Morgantown reminds me a lot of Hollister in the springtime—the rolling green hills.

This is your second-annual bike ride across America. The first one was down South, and the second one is in the middle, so next year is it Seattle to Boston?

Next year I'd like to go tail the Tour de France. You can ride behind the actual pelotons, so we'll see. We've got some potential sponsors for that, so we'll see what my body does.

Let's back up a second—you were completely paralyzed?

Yes.



You're sitting here in front of me, riding a bicycle across the country, you walked in here, and you're going to walk out. That doesn't sound like what people think about someone who was paralyzed.

Well, it's not the norm, no, and I'd be lying if I didn't say that it was a lot of hard, hard work, and it still is, Davey. I wake up every morning and my body doesn't want to move. It aches and it stings and it's hard to deal with, but I like to swallow that lump in my throat and challenge my adversity—I mean, that's what drove me to win races as a youth rider, and that's what drives me today to overcome my condition.

At what point during your recovery did you think, I'm going to ride across the country?

Really, it started in ICU. I had some crazy morphine dreams that I was riding a bicycle.

And obviously, as a motocross racer, we train on bicycles—mountain bike, road bike—but I didn't spend a whole bunch of time on a bicycle. For some reason, I just envisioned it, and I love visualizing. I loved meditating on that, and after about five years, cycling became a reality for me. First the machine pedaling my legs for me—other individuals who have been paralyzed know these types of machines—and then I had the idea that a tandem bike would work. I couldn't steer the bike or shift it or brake it like I wanted to, but I could sit in the back seat and pedal.

I knew it was a stepping-stone. Everything that I've done for the last nine years has been baby steps: building on them, recognizing them, and then celebrating them. And I knew that I wouldn't be on a tandem forever; I wanted to ultimately hold the bars again and make my own calls. Really, if I stop doing what I do, I'll go back to my chair really fast. Like today, sitting with you right now, I haven't been on the bike for a few days just because we had some downtime and my body is hurting. It's like I need to start doing it again. My personality is kind of extreme to think that I could even get on a bike for five miles, so I said, Well, hell, it's like *Forrest Gump*—if I'm going to

do this, I may as well go all the way!

Obviously, you're not getting across the country by yourself. As a motocross racer, I know you want to thank your sponsors.

Absolutely! You know, it's about the sponsors—that's the only way we could do this. It's funny, I lead my life by what I've learned in motocross. Business and stuff that I'm learning these days, I base it on racing. I base it on the relationships that you form with your sponsors and the partners; I base it on the commitment and the dedication and courage and sacrifice. All the top-level pros understand these things, and that's how I lead myself. I've learned so much through my youth and early days traveling and racing, and the highs and lows of the sport, I now apply to my recovery, to my relationships, and to the work that we do know. So

longtime sponsor Fox Racing—Todd Hicks is a good man. The day before we left the tour, we left the rig there at Fox and stayed the night. So Fox has been with us for a good long while, and it just makes me feel good. Although they don't make that much cycling gear and I can't wear that killer new motocross gear, I do run their casual stuff and it makes me feel good to have them as a supporter still. I'd love to branch off and do a product line with them—maybe the Rise Above line! Then we have DVS shoes, Utopia Optics, NuStep.... NuStep is a piece of cardiovascular equipment which is a new sponsor this year, and it's a vital piece of equipment that has helped me with my recovery. And I actually have one in the van that we tow behind the bus, so I take that equipment around and I demonstrate it and speak on behalf of it.

What are you riding these days?

I ride a KHS bike—all carbon. KHS has been

with us now since we started the cycling. They were providing tandem bicycles, and last year after I reached Florida, I got off the seat of that tandem and said, "Okay, that's it, I'm done sitting backseat." It took about two years to develop this trike, and I can't wait for Jimmy Button to ride this thing. It's perfect for the balance problem. I mean, it's not a balance problem—it's more of a synchronicity issue. Getting in and out of my clips, shifting and braking and starting, stopping.... I can ride a two-wheel bike—I've been twisting the throttle since I was 3, so handlebars and a seat feel second-nature. But having the three wheels allows me, if I'm tired and I'm done, to stop and stay clipped in and I'm fine. It's an all-carbon black beauty KHS trike, a one-off. There's only one other bike like it in the country, and it's a steel frame, and that kid qualified for the Paralympics this year.

Then we also have our foundation sponsors—Road 2 Recovery, Life Rolls On, Challenged Athletes. They've all been an integral part.

How can people follow your exploits? I have a feeling this isn't going to be your last big ride.

Absolutely not. This Rise Above Tour has no end sight. We just continue on. It's my personal evolution. CORE will exist, and I will continue personally promoting it through my personal efforts, and we'll have people join us and ride with us. A young motocrosser this year, Jordan Delaurier, who is Paul Delaurier's son, he was with us on the tour. He rode from Salt Lake City to Denver, and I let him ride the trike and he put a big effort forward. So just having people join us with the evolution of the tour [is great]. You can follow along at www.riseabovetour.com or on my personal website, www.aaronbakers.com. ✕

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