

ESPN THE MAGAZINE

July 18, 2005

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY NORMAN JEAN ROY

VICIOUS CYCLES

KENTUCKY THOROUGHbred
NICKY HAYDEN IS READY TO
TAKE ON THE MotoGP WORLD
WHEN THE FASTEST SPORT
ON TWO WHEELS RETURNS
TO THE STATES

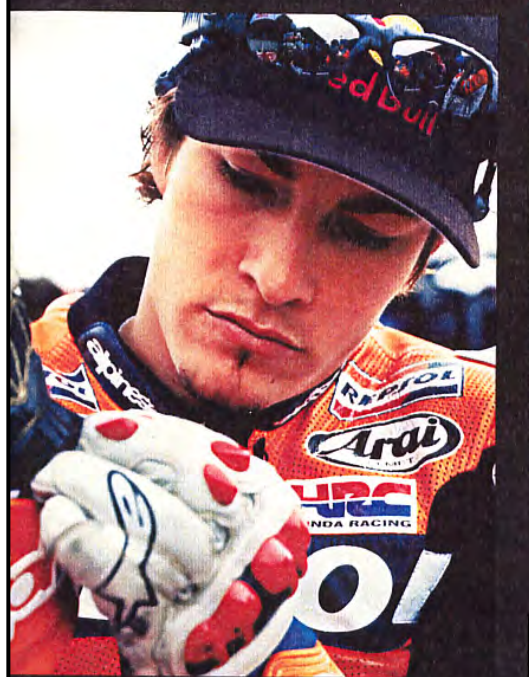
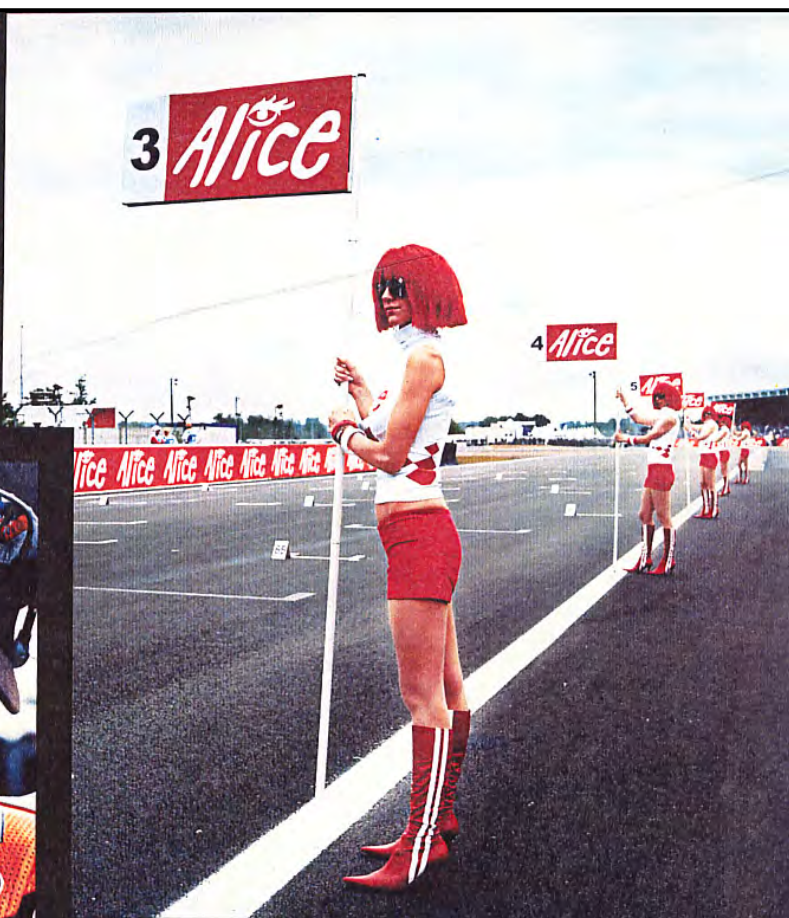
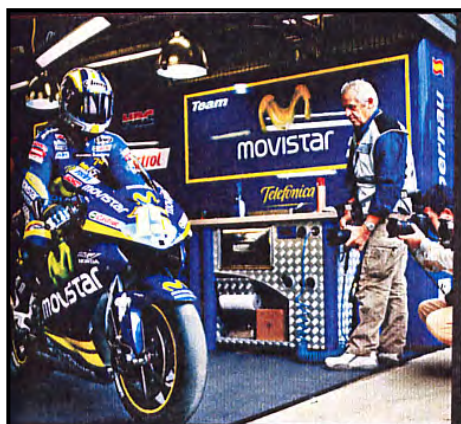
BY TIM STRUBY

Moments before
he climbs aboard
his Ducati,
Spanish racer
Carlos Checa
steels himself for
the most intense
45 minutes in
motorsports.



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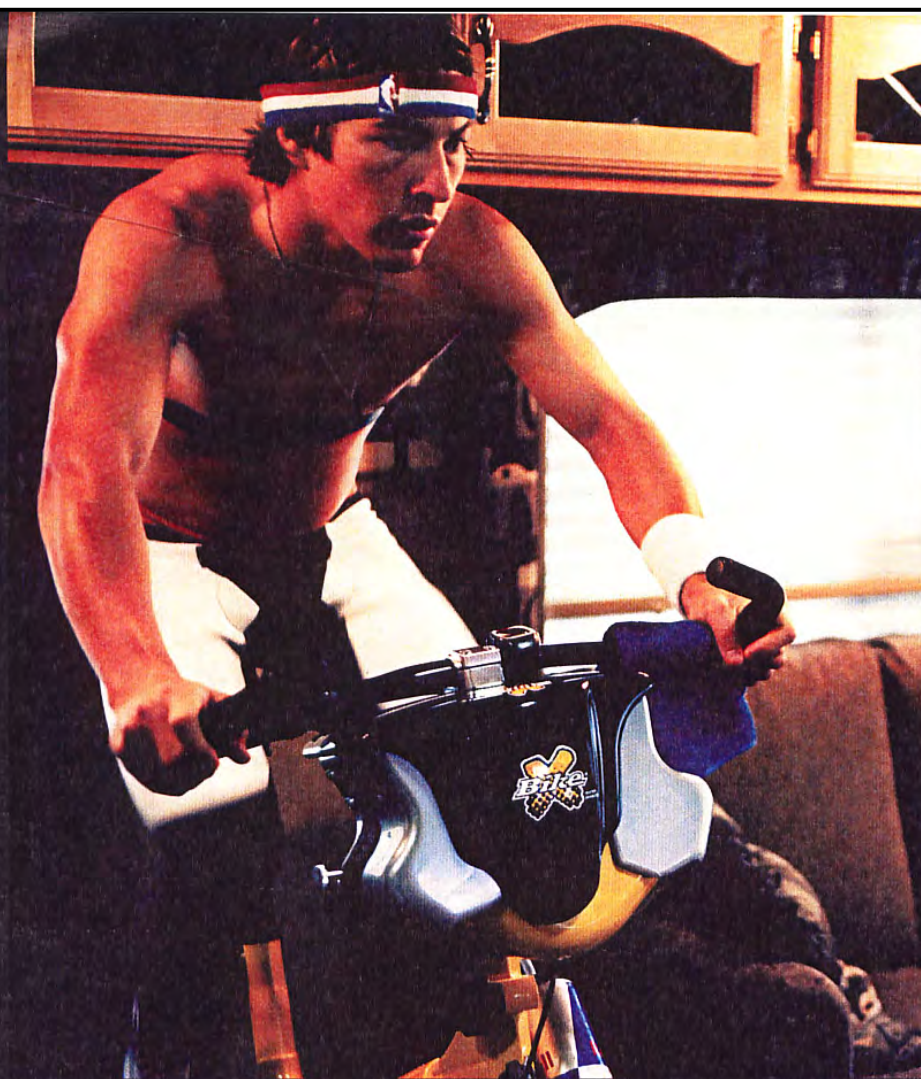
It's been a rough road abroad for Hayden (left), who's still trying to duplicate the success he achieved back home, where he became the youngest U.S. Superbike champ in history. Then again, the rest of the MotoGP field hasn't had much luck in trying to catch four-time reigning king Valentino Rossi (below), who's speeding away with yet another world title.



ESPN THE MAGAZINE (continued)

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Hayden races machines that go from 0 to 100 in 2.4 seconds and handle turns at a 50° angle—which means he needs plenty of seat time on a bike with much less horsepower.



A little before 10 on a Sunday morning in May, four hours before race time, the Le Mans grandstands are already packed with rowdy, rain-soaked fans waving Italian, Spanish and French flags. The Grand Prix Alice de France is shoulder-to-shoulder freaks for as far as the eye can see. Many of them have been hunkering down in ragged tents through three days of torrential downpours that have turned the track campground into a postapocalyptic swamp. The drunken, leather-clad masses (with their thousands of mud-caked motorcycles) have gathered to watch the world's best riders on the world's fastest bikes. They've come to witness the madness of MotoGP.

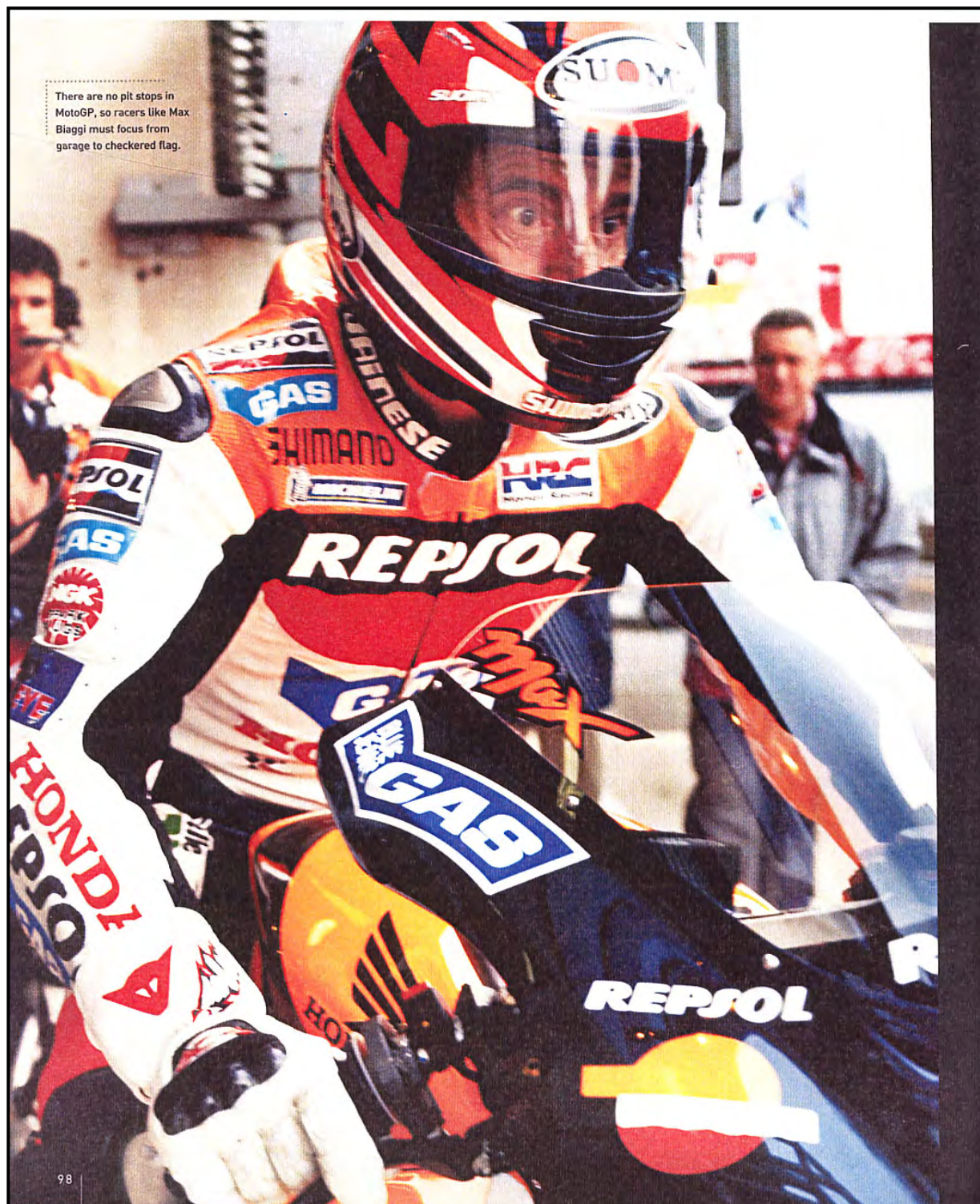
Within the secure confines of the track, however, order reigns. Rows of spit-polished yellow, blue, orange and red rigs are lined up next to spotless pit garages. The infamous umbrella girls stand by, ready to shade idle riders from any evidence of sun. Sponsor hotties saunter past in neon wigs and

matching hot pants, while VIPs quaff champagne in hospitality tents. Dozens of spanking-new mobile homes perch in a tightly guarded parking lot.

Inside one of those RVs, 23-year-old American wunderkind Nicky Hayden sits on his bike. No, not the 240-horsepower Repsol Honda RC211V that would run you more than a million bucks if you could buy one, which you can't, but the yellow exercise bike he uses to get the blood flowing. Even from his trailer, Nicky can feel the anticipation swelling in the stands. For these 75,000 fans, and for 300 million others like them, a MotoGP race is the most thrilling 45 minutes in sports: riders just inches apart from one another, their knees skimming the asphalt, flying out of hairpin turns and hitting straightaway speeds of 210 mph.

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He's also comforted knowing that he'll soon be home. On July 10, after an 11-year absence, MotoGP returns to America with the Red Bull U.S. Grand Prix at Laguna Seca, just outside Monterey, Calif. And in a sport where the difference between first and fifth is sometimes less than a second, comfort can make a monster of a difference.



There are no seat belts, no roll bars—nothing to stop man from being flung from machine and thrown down the track.

The fever pitch outside doesn't faze Nicky. The rider known as the Kentucky Kid has been racing since he was 5. He turned pro at age 16, and five years later became the youngest champion in the history of the U.S. Superbike Series. Now, in his third season of MotoGP, he's used to crowds of 100,000 zealots who cross continents just to catch a race.

He's also comforted knowing that he'll soon be home. On July 10, after an 11-year absence, MotoGP returns to America with the Red Bull U.S. Grand Prix at Laguna Seca, just outside Monterey, Calif. And in a sport where the difference between first and fifth is sometimes less than a second, comfort can make a monster of a difference.

The day before the Le Mans race, Nicky sits down in the Repsol hospitality tent for about the thousandth interview he's done in the past thousand days. "My English not so good," says the reporter in an elusive European accent. "It's all good," Nicky replies, as he flips through a motorcycle mag. Then, with that broad smile that landed him a page among *People's* 50 Hottest Bachelors, he answers the same questions he's been asked over and over again. First bike? A hand-me-down. First win? He was maybe 6. Grew up in Owensboro, Ky. Worked for his car-dealer daddy as a repo man. Doesn't smoke, doesn't drink. No girlfriend, no time. What's he miss most when he's out on the circuit? Hell, that's easy. His friends, his family, his town.

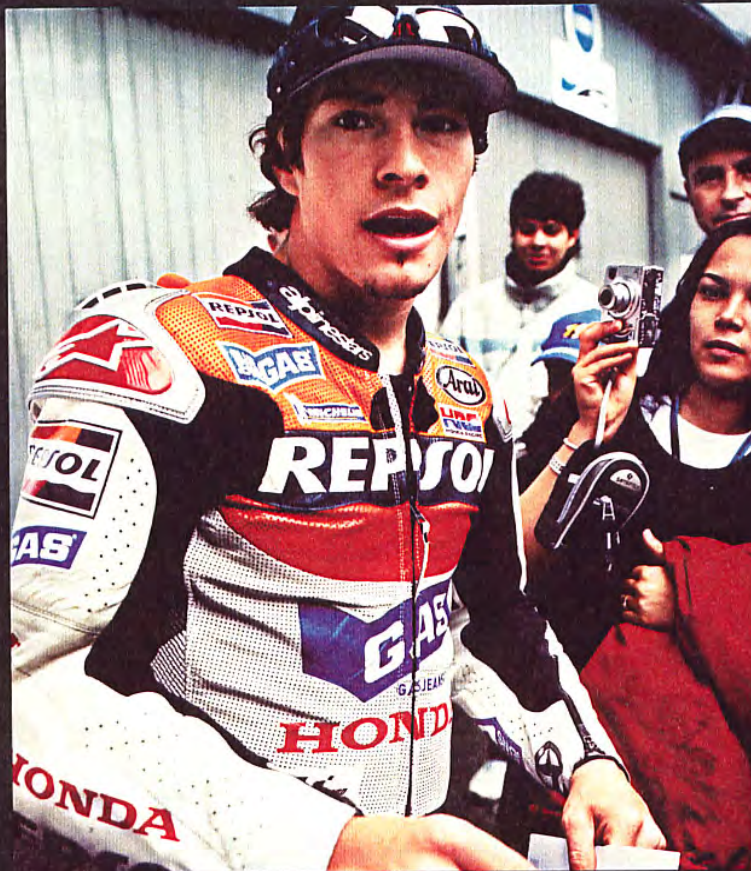
Being so far from home ain't easy. Nicky's a country boy in the middle of an international flying circus. This year, the MotoGP will hit 17 countries on five continents. One week he's racing in Japan, the next in Malaysia, the next in Qatar. Everywhere he turns, people are speaking French, Italian, Spanish or Japanese. Nicky? "I'm still workin' on English."

Even after three years, he is confronted with unidentifiable foods, unfamiliar tracks and unbelievably powerful bikes. Most dauntingly, he is still winless and facing a rival who's unrivaled in the

Valentino Rossi (in yellow cap) is considered the sport's greatest racer ever, so he's used to the mob scene he faced after winning at Le Mans. To escape the adoring masses, he recently moved from his home in Italy to the relative peace and quiet of London.

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sport's history. From his motor coach window, Nicky has a view of what it's like to be a god. Just 30 feet away sits the rolling home of Valentino Rossi. Not only did the 26-year-old Italian earn his fourth straight MotoGP world title last year—and \$28 million—but he's also won half the races he's ever started. Day and night, fans crowd beside Rossi's trailer for a glimpse of their full-throttle idol. Last season in Valencia, Spain, MotoGP enthusiast Michael Jordan walked past Rossi's trailer. Hundreds of fans turned to look, but nobody budged. Why risk losing their position?

ONE MINUTE before 2 on Sunday afternoon, Nicky Hayden straddles his bike in the second row of the starting grid. His Caribbean-blue eyes narrow like a sharpshooter's as he glances into the sea of grandstand flags—not a single Stars and Stripes among them. He turns forward. The starting light glows.

A head-jarring roar fills the air as a Technicolor

Hayden looks forward to a homeland advantage when the MotoGP road show rolls into California.

blur of 21 bikes peels into Turn 1. Nicky shoots into second. Rossi, who had the pole, gets caught wide and finds himself in sixth. On Lap 3 (of 28), the champ starts picking off his victims. On Lap 9, the inevitable: Rossi passes Nicky. By Lap 20, the Kentucky Kid is sixth, where he finishes the race.

"My start was unreal," Nicky says later, back in his mobile home. "I felt good the first half, right there with the big boys." But hanging close isn't enough. Nicky knows he must get that first checkered flag. Just wait for Laguna Seca, he says. "I won my first AMA National race there. Out here, I'm gettin' beat on their turf. I don't want them guys comin' into our backyard and beatin' me."

Especially when his backyard will feature his own food, his own flag and his own freaks. 🍌

OUTTAKES

DAN PATRICK

HOLDS
ON
TIGHT
WITH

NICKY HAYDEN



THERE'S AN ART TO CRASHING

DP: Okay, Kentucky kid—what's the best thing about the Bluegrass State?

NE: Every part is good, but probably the Southern hospitality.

DP: Not Ashley Judd in a Kentucky Wildcats jersey?

NE: Now we're talking. But lately Big Blue hasn't been getting it done, so I didn't want to oversell them.

DP: What do you think of that Kentucky blue?

NE: Well, I don't paint my face with it for games or anything.

DP: Are there any celebrities you've gone riding with?

NE: Michael Jordan did some laps at a race. For a guy his size, he's skilled on a bike.

DP: Would it be easier for him to win a race or for you to score a point in the NBA?

NE: Me scoring a point. I'm sure I could **flip** and get myself to the free throw line.

DP: What's your greatest nonmotorcycle sports achievement?

NE: I once had six touchdowns in Thanksgiving Day football. I'm not much of an athlete.

DP: Whom were you playing against?

NE: Some neighborhood kids and a few buddies.

DP: Whom did you resemble out there, scoring all those touchdowns?

NE: **Ikkey Woods**. I did the Ikkey Shuffle after each one like it was the Super Bowl.

DP: Last time you had to make sure you had all your body parts intact?

NE: I recently crashed in **France** in the rain. The first thing I did after I caught my breath was take inventory. I started by moving my feet, then worked my way up from there. There's an art to crashing—you try to soak it up, roll with it, not fight it. Suck your arms out, and you're getting hurt.

DP: If you got the American Chopper guys to make you a bike, what would it look like?

NE: I'm no bad biker boy, but I'd go full black, the whole **Hells Angels** act. I'm not tattooed and don't usually wear black leather, but I'd be tough when I rolled.

DP: Can the average person on the street tell what you do for a living?

NE: If I'm holding a sign.

DP: What kind of car do you drive?

NE: A Honda Ridgeline truck and a **Bentley**.

DP: A Bentley? How does that go over in Kentucky?

NE: Well, I don't often drive it around my hometown, Owensboro, but really, it doesn't blend in on most roads. I had a Mercedes S600, but last year I told my sister if I won the championship it was hers, and I'm a man of my word.

DP: If you win the championship this year, can I have the Bentley?

NE: No, my other sister gets the Bentley. Blood is thick in Kentucky.

DP: What kind of gas mileage do you get on your bike?

NE: I couldn't tell you. I have **mechanics** to handle that.

DP: Can you take apart a bike?

NE: Oh, I could get it apart. But you don't want me tuning up your car.



LISTEN TO THE DAN PATRICK SHOW ON ESPN RADIO (MONDAY-FRIDAY 1-4 PM ET)

SPEED RACER

MotoGP star Nicky Hayden wants to rule the sexiest sport in the world

TEXT & PORTRAIT
DUSTIN A. BEATTY

82

MotoGP is inherently romantic. Racers—and their million-dollar machines—fly around the world to compete on legendary tracks in the most exotic locales. The only thing louder than the bikes themselves is the din of the roaring fans; like the rowdy spectators at a European soccer match, they’re cloaked in the flags of their respective countries with faces painted like primordial hunters. Scantly clad models strut around the paddock, oftentimes hoisting umbrellas for the riders, eliciting catcalls in at least a half-dozen languages from passers-by. It’s one of the highest-paying, sexiest sports on the planet, but despite all the glitz and glamour, the men behind MotoGP work hard, train hard and focus on one singular goal: *winning*.

In 2006, the MotoGP world champion was Kentucky native Nicky Hayden. Born into a family of racers, Hayden has the sport in his blood. Both Earl and Rose, Hayden’s parents, used to race, and they raised their five kids to do the same. Hayden, along with his two brothers, Tommy and Roger, rose through the ranks of domestic road racing, including superbikes, for which Hayden won the championship in 2002. However, it was always the elite world of MotoGP that Hayden dreamed of. It’s regarded as the Formula One of motorcycle racing; winning a championship is akin to a mountaineer conquering Everest.

The path to MotoGP supremacy was a long one for Hayden. For the sake of brevity, let’s just say the man trains...*a lot*. His grueling regimen is that of an Olympic athlete, complete with a team of dedicated trainers, not to mention the support of world-class sponsors like Honda, Red Bull and Alpinestars. It’s an entourage hell-bent on making both Hayden and his 800cc machine a winning combination.



HAYDEN WEARS JEANS AND PULLOVER BY *Gas*; T-SHIRT BY *Alpinestars*; WATCH BY *Tissot*; NECKLACE, HAYDEN’S OWN

MotoGP racers need all the help they can get; it's a team effort to take the checkered flag, and even the most minute issues with a GP bike can cost a racer a place on the podium. This summer at Donington, the Honda team's biggest concern was fuel consumption. Hayden was on a new machine that is regulated by extremely strict guidelines. After the first lap, a warning light went on, and while the bike wasn't in critical condition, the threat of a mechanical failure can mess with a rider's head. Hayden ended up taking seventh place.

Despite those early hang-ups, 2008 definitely seems like the year for Hayden to iron out the kinks on his new bike. With little downtime between each race, his team scrambles to find the perfect tire combination, fuel ratios and overall design that will slice seconds off his lap time. With the right regimen, focus and an impeccable team behind him, Hayden is poised to win the inaugural Red Bull Indianapolis GP in September and eventually regain that cherished title: world champion of the sexiest sport on the planet. ■

For more information and statistics, visit NICKYHAYDEN.COM and REDBULLINDIANAPOLISGP.COM.

IT'S REGARDED AS THE FORMULA ONE OF MOTORCYCLE RACING; WINNING A CHAMPIONSHIP IS AKIN TO A MOUNTAINEER CONQUERING EVEREST.



EARLIER THIS YEAR, HAYDEN RODE AN INAUGURAL LAP AT THE INDIANAPOLIS MOTOR SPEEDWAY NOT ONLY ON HIS GP BIKE, BUT A VINTAGE INDIAN REplete WITH VINTAGE RACE ATTIRE TO BOOT. SEPT. 14 MARKS THE FIRST-EVER MOTOGP RACE AT INDIANAPOLIS.

IMAGES
BRIAN J. NELSON



★ COLLEGE LIFE—*UNCENSORED*

COSMO

50

TIPS TO
GLOWING
SKIN &
SEXY
HAIR

Scarlett

"I'M YOUNG AND
I'M VOTING—I'M MAKING
MY VOICE HEARD"

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gossip

Ashley tears it up on the track—just like the guys.



COSMOGIRL CHALLENGE:

Ashley Fiolek

Life isn't fair, but motocross racer Ashley Fiolek, 18, figured out how to deal. Here, she challenges you to do the same.

“I was born profoundly deaf, and many people think that must make motocross racing harder for me. But it's actually more challenging in racing to be a woman than a deaf person. Women don't make as much prize money, and we don't get as much practice time on the track. But if race coordinators cut my time, I don't whine about it to my friends—I talk to the referee to see what can be done and use the situation as an incentive to try harder to prove I'm equal to the guys.”

MY CHALLENGE TO YOU: “If something happens to you that you don't think is fair, don't complain—try to find a solution. If you're a good cheerleader but you don't make the squad, ask the coach why you didn't so you know how you need to improve. If you got a bad grade on a term paper that you think you didn't deserve, ask the teacher what you could do differently next time. You can only control your actions, not those of others, so get out there and do your best!”

BUNDLE AND BLOCK

You protect yourself from the cold with a hat, but you also need to protect your skin from the sun. Nine out of 10 teens don't wear SPF every day—don't be one of them! Remember, the sun can still do damage in the winter, so apply moisturizer that has SPF every day.



Thirst Aid

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SILENCE IS GOLDEN

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN LOOMIS





CROWDS LOVE **ASHLEY FIOLEK**, THE FASTEST
WOMAN RACER IN MOTOCROSS. IF ONLY SHE
COULD HEAR THEM ROAR.

BY ALYSSA ROENIGK

IT'S TOO DAMN QUIET IN ASHLEY FIOLEK'S RED FORD F-150.

The radio is silent and the windows are up, muting the road noise. Her hands at 10 and 2, Fiolek is focused on the road, and that means no texting, no cell phone, not so much as a glance at herself in the rearview on this sultry mid-March afternoon. During the entire 13-minute drive to Joey's, a private track in her hometown of St. Augustine, Fla., the 18-year-old motocross pro says nothing. Then again, she's deaf, and she would need her hands to talk.

The silence disappears shortly after Fiolek parks next to the track and unloads her 249cc Honda dirt bike. She's the only rider kicking up dirt today, but the bike's constant braaaaap plugs the spaces between all the air molecules. Fiolek tears around the track, a red-white-and-blue blur carving up earth tones, while mechanic Cody Wolf watches from a lawn chair in the center. Fiolek is working on cornering today.

After a few laps, Fiolek slows and pulls to the side. She sits for a moment on the motionless bike, her long, sandy hair sneaking out below her helmet. The fastest woman racer in the country is tiny, at 5'2", 105 pounds, and she balances the bike on one foot because she's not tall enough to reach the ground with two. "Isn't it so peaceful out here," she signs to Wolf. Her wide smile, visible through her full-face helmet, suggests this is more statement than question. Wolf translates and laughs at the irony. Fiolek misses the joke.

To Fiolek, the track is peaceful, and on race day the silence is perhaps her greatest asset. "I am more focused," Fiolek signs. She's home now after a two-hour practice, in the living room of her family's modest three-bedroom place at the end of a gravel road. Her mom, Roni, translates: "Before a race, I can't hear people talking smack to me or bothering me at the line." And when the flag drops, she can't hear the blare of other bikes, the track announcer or crowd noise. "If somebody is coming up behind me, I don't have the pressure of knowing they're there. But if I'm coming up on someone, they have that pressure." There are times, Fiolek adds, when she doesn't even know what place she's in when she finishes. In her first race as a pro on the Women's Motocross Association circuit, last May, Fiolek crossed the line and looked at Wolf. On the pit board he had written, "You won!" "I didn't even know," says Fiolek.

The rookie went on to win three of the next five

rides and upset five-time champ Jessica Patterson for the WMA title. (Fiolek opened the 2009 season on May 23 with a win at Glen Helen Raceway in San Bernardino, Calif.) She reached the podium twice in four races at the women's world championship series last summer in Europe. She's the only woman rider to be featured on the cover of a major U.S. motocross magazine (*Transworld Motocross*, December 2008). And in January, Honda Red Bull Racing signed her to its motocross team, making her the first American woman with a factory ride. For 2009, she wants even more. "I want to qualify for a men's race," says Fiolek. "Sometimes I go on the message boards and see people say that I won't do it, that no girl would ever qualify with the men. I get so mad." Not everyone agrees with those posts. Says James Stewart, two-time AMA Supercross

travel from the engine to her body. "If she comes to me in the pits and says, 'The clutch feels weird in my hand,' I have learned to listen to her," Wolf says. "It's often a tiny adjustment, but she feels everything."

It's neutral that gives her hell.

"If other people accidentally hit neutral, they hear it," Fiolek says. "I can't, and it is hard to feel." The mistake is a common one for riders, especially when they're slamming through difficult turns and rhythm sections, such as whoops and triples. "Oh yeah. I've flipped over the bars a few times because of bad shifts," Fiolek says. To compensate, she spends a lot of practice time perfecting this basic skill. And it shows.

"I don't think the casual fan appreciates Ashley as much as someone who has ridden a motorcycle," says Fiolek's teammate Andrew Short, who finished



Fiolek was 2½ when her parents discovered she was deaf. Before that, doctors thought she suffered from mental retardation.

champ: "I wouldn't be surprised if she qualifies. She's already overcome harder challenges."

Despite Fiolek's success, though, no one would say that being deaf is all checkered flags and quiet comfort. Her inability to hear her bike creates serious challenges; sound is an essential element of dirt bike racing. By listening to their bikes, riders know when to shift, when they have a mechanical problem and when they've made a mistake, such as accidentally bumping the shift lever into neutral while twisting the throttle to accelerate, which causes the engine to rev wildly. Instead of using sound as a guide, Fiolek has learned to shift gears and diagnose mechanical glitches by vibrations that

third in the 2009 AMA Supercross series. "The first time I saw her ride, I expected her to shift too early or too late. But she always keeps the bike in the meat of the power. It's baffling how perfectly she shifts." Fiolek's deftness may baffle Short, but it's not a surprise to those who understand how a body compensates for an inability to hear. "Because she was born deaf, Ashley knows only one way to perceive the world," says Waheeda Samady, who treats the deaf as a resident physician at Rady Children's Hospital in San Diego. "Her other senses, like her vision and sensitivity to vibration, are more finely tuned than those of a hearing person. If we have full use of all of our senses, we don't know how to block one out to focus on another. But Ashley is able to do that."

In short, Fiolek relies on certain signals more

acutely than hearing riders do. "Those sensations are available to everyone, but on most of us they're lost," says moto-Xer Drake McElroy, who spent 15 years racing motocross before switching to freestyle. "The motor sends vibrations up through the frame to the levers, from the soles of your feet to the insides of your legs to your torso and hands. Each contact point has a different vibration. Everybody feels it, we're just not in tune to it."

For Fiolek, riding a motorcycle has always "just felt right." When she was 7, her dad, Jim, a former motocross racer, took the training wheels off her 50cc bike. "She rode for three hours that day," he says. "Later, when she switched from bikes with automatic transmissions to manual, people wanted us to install a red light on her bike so she would know when to shift. But we never put an emphasis on the fact that shifting would be harder for her or talked about her limitations. We didn't think she had any."

When word spread that a deaf rider had joined St. Augustine's amateur motocross circuit, parents of Fiolek's competitors reacted as expected. Some worried she would not be able to hear their kids riding closely behind her, while others balked at the idea that Jim and Roni would allow their deaf daughter to ride. Says Roni: "I told them, 'It's a dangerous sport. You can be concerned that I'm

putting my kid on a motorcycle. But not that I'm putting my deaf kid on a bike.'" Most concerns disappeared the instant the other parents saw Fiolek ride: Even as a 7-year-old, she was careful. And fast. "When Ashley was young, we had a lot of conversations about exiting the track and riding safely," Jim says. "We did more drills, more training. I don't worry about Ashley. She's probably a safer rider than most anyone on the track."

Later, when doctors asked if they would be interested in cochlear implants—electronic devices placed behind the ear that can provide hearing sensation even for people with profound deafness, such as Ashley—the Fioleks said no. Cochlears would have made contact sports such as motocross more hazardous because the implant site would be vulnerable to a blow. But mostly, the Fioleks didn't believe their daughter was broken, so there was no need to fix her.

Sure, the Fioleks tried the traditional deaf child route. When Ashley was young, the family moved from Michigan to St. Augustine so she could attend the Florida School for the Deaf and the



Fiolek sends 1,000 texts a day, and many of her friends and competitors have learned sign language.

SHE MAY BE DEAF, BUT DR. SAMADY SAYS FIOLEK HAS ADVANTAGES: "HER OTHER SENSES, LIKE HER VISION AND SENSITIVITY TO VIBRATION, ARE MORE FINELY TUNED THAN THOSE OF A HEARING PERSON."

HAVE QUESTIONS FOR FIOLEK? SHE'LL ANSWER THEM. HIT ESPN.COM/ACTION FOR DETAILS.

Blind, where she played hoops, ran track and took ballet classes. But when Ashley reached ninth grade, her parents pulled her from FSDB to homeschool her because they felt she was being taught that deafness was a limitation. "The deaf schools hold students back," says Roni, who was an instructional assistant at the school. "Too many kids grew up thinking something was wrong with them."

The Fioleks think the opposite. Being deaf may present challenges, but why not focus on the advantages? The Fioleks have long believed that many deaf athletes have physical tools to compete in sports but lack opportunity and a knowledgeable coach fluent in sign language. With her father as her coach, Ashley has both. "If a coach can't communicate, he can't teach the sport," says Donald Ammons, president of the Deaflympics, an event modeled after the Winter and Summer Games. "The children might

have great athletic talent, but they're stuck. They grow up frustrated because they know they have the talent to be exceptional." Because few mainstream programs can afford knowledgeable interpreters, only a handful of deaf athletes—former NFL defensive linemen Bonnie Sloan and Kenny Walker, MLB journeyman Curtis Pride, Olympic swimmer Terence Parkin of South Africa, to name four—have reached the elite level. Count Ashley Fiolek among them.

If her cell phone bill is any proof, Fiolek has blossomed into a mini celebrity. Her address book is packed with names and numbers, and she communicates endlessly via text, IM, e-mail, MySpace and Facebook messages. "I send about 1,000 texts in a day," says Fiolek, scooping up a handful of M&M's from a bowl on the living room table. That means she's averaging a text every minute she's awake. (The average U.S. teen texts about 35 times a day.) Example:

Got my new puppy today! Turbo! He's freaking adorable. :) Very playful n hyper. Haha!

FIOLEK SITS on the front porch of her home, her feet dangling over the edge. Her bike is parked in the garage out back, and she is still wearing riding pants and a purple T-shirt more than three hours after her March practice ended. She tries to describe the day's riding session, but little brother Kicker, freshly home from preschool, keeps launching a broken scooter off the porch and onto the grass three feet below, screaming the whole time. Cody is trying to translate Fiolek's conversation, but he's constantly interrupted because it's also his job to catch Kicker before he smashes into the ground. Fiolek is oblivious to the commotion—until she notices her mom's face; Roni looks as if she's about to lose her mind. "Sometimes, I bet everyone wishes they were deaf," Ashley signs, then smiles.

This time, she's in on the joke.



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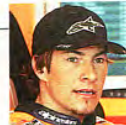
THE POST



PASSION PLAY

Travis Diener isn't the type to stop and say I told you so just because he's been drafted by the Magic (*On the Edge*, Aug. 1). He has plenty of fans, though, who will gladly do that for him. Erin Cary of Milwaukee writes: "Travis gets publicity only for working hard and being an underdog. Can't we admit he's just a darn good player? True, he is white, shorter than many and a bit scrawny, but he was one of the best college players last season. The NBA isn't a barrier for him to 'knock over,' it's the deserved next stop in the career of a talented athlete." Joe Schmidt of Oshkosh, Wis., adds: "Living my entire life in Wisconsin, I always felt we were short on hometown heroes. But Fond du Lac's Travis Diener proves working hard can lead to success no matter where you're from." In Neenah, Wis., Marc Goodman knows that firsthand: "As a high school opponent of Travis', I haven't always cheered for him. But there's no denying that his work ethic, hard-nosed play and court sense deserve big props. He epitomizes everything a basketball player should be." So it's time for the naysayers to back off. If there are any left.

"CAN'T WE ADMIT HE'S JUST A DARN GOOD PLAYER?"



UPDATE NICKY HAYDEN

Thirty-eight starts into his MotoGP career, the Kentucky Kid (*Vicious Cycles*, July 18) earned his first W, at the Red Bull U.S. Grand Prix on July 10. Over 57,000 fans turned out to cheer on Hayden, but the real celebration came later, in the VIP section. There, a bevy of A-listers including M.J., Brad Pitt and Matt LeBlanc awaited the ebullient winner. Even MotoGP überstar and points leader Valentino Rossi dropped by to fire an air horn in his rival's direction. What was meant as an homage may have heralded a changing of the guard, as well.

-TIM STRUBY

NO LUCK AT ALL

The idea that Rafael Palmeiro is "a hero of circumstance" who has succeeded only in being in the "right place at the perfect time" (*The Sports Guy*, Aug. 1) is laughable. People in the right place at the perfect time put a quarter into a slot machine and win a million dollars—they don't get 3,000 hits and 500 HRs. Tim Schwartz Farmington Hills, Mich.

GUT CHECK

Great article on Bob Wickman

(*Big Chief*, Aug. 1). He showed he's a stand-up guy by staying with the Tribe to earn his salary. Now he just needs to keep standing up to hitters in the ninth for the Indians to take the AL wild card. Ahad Khan, Mooresville, N.C.

BRONX BULLY

George Steinbrenner is not a great baseball owner (*Twilight's Last Glimmer*, Aug. 1). He's made more bad moves than good, but has the money to cover his mistakes. For intelligent ownership, look to

a team like the Twins. Steinbrenner, who benefits from a ridiculous cable contract and other inequities in baseball's financial system, would fail miserably with such a team. Bill Gillies, Detroit

WIE TOO SOON

Sure, Michelle Wie has awesome potential and she is already an excellent golfer (*Audible*, Aug. 1). But what's she won? Nothing! Why not focus on the young women who are actually winning on the Tour? Please don't waste

our time with stories about Wie until she is deserving. Colin Mildred, Davenport, Iowa

FANTASYLAND

Re Eddie Ballgame's 10 steps to a fantasy league title (*All the Right Picks*, Aug. 1): arrive early, get a good night's sleep, stay sober? Sounds like work. I'll stick with rushing in five minutes late, quaffing three quick ones and belting out "Ron Dayne!" four rounds too early. Way more fun. Gary Mahoney Scituate, Mass.

GOT ISSUES?

DON'T KEEP THEM TO YOURSELF

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ALL NEWS >> OLN gets its highest ratings with final Tour stage; acquires rights to 2007 America's Cup ... NBC Sports keeps Ryder Cup through 2014 ...



UPDATE NICKY HAYDEN

Thirty-eight starts into his MotoGP career, the Kentucky Kid (*Vicious Cycles*, July 18) earned his first W, at the Red Bull U.S. Grand Prix on July 10. Over 57,000 fans turned out to cheer on Hayden, but the real celebration came later, in the VIP section. There, a bevy of A-listers including M.J., Brad Pitt and Matt LeBlanc awaited the ebullient winner. Even MotoGP überstar and points leader Valentino Rossi dropped by to fire an air horn in his rival's direction. What was meant as an homage may have heralded a changing of the guard, as well.

-TIM STRUBY



...To Crash a Motorcycle at 140 mph

> BY NICKY HAYDEN, 27, MOTO GP RACER

The rain started after the second lap. My helmet has a tinted shield, and I was having a hard time seeing where the deeper puddles were. Le Mans is a 2.6-mile course, and it was raining harder on different parts of the track. Puddles were changing from lap to lap. Coming into a turn on lap 26 of 28, I hydroplaned. It wasn't the kind of fall where I had time to think, I can correct this. It was instant. I went forward off the bike, but the impact wasn't too hard because I immediately started tumbling—sky, ground, sky, ground. It felt like I accelerated on the wet pavement, and then more once I hit the grass. Like a Slip 'n Slide. Out of the corner of my eye I saw my bike flip and knew they'd be bringing out the butter for it, 'cause it was toast.

> Watch Nicky Hayden's 140 mph crash at esquire.com/wifi08.

...To Watch Your Son Crash a Motorcycle at 140 mph

> BY ROSE HAYDEN, 58, HOMEMAKER

I was just trying to see if he was moving. I've been around this long enough to know when something is not right, but this time I couldn't tell right away. I've seen crashes and thought the person would get up but didn't. You never know. I don't think I talked to anybody. When I saw him moving around, I knew we'd be all right. The team took me by scooter in the pouring rain to the medical center. I called my husband, who was tracking the race on a computer. All he could see was that Nicky didn't turn in a lap time. I'm sure he was hoping it was a mechanical issue.

After about 150 yards, I came to a halt in the gravel. Somewhere along the way, my visor got pulled up, so I was lying there with a mouthful of dirt. Tasted pretty nasty. It all knocked the wind out of me pretty good. I tried to catch my breath and started taking inventory. Moved my toes and feet, then worked on up to my head and shoulders. Sitting there in the gravel trap with the adrenaline going, I didn't feel any physical pain yet. It was all frustration.

—AS TOLD TO BUDDY KITE

Hayden will race in the Red Bull Indianapolis GP on September 14.

...To Hit a Walk-Off Grand Slam

> BY TORII HUNTER, 33, LOS ANGELES ANGELS

Bottom of the ninth; Indians 4, Angels 2; bases loaded, one out



I had hit walk-off homers before but never a walk-off grand slam—not in Little League, Babe Ruth, nowhere. I'm thinking about getting a ball into the outfield to get a run in, not trying to do too much. When you're standing in that batter's box, locked in the way I was, you can see the spin, the rotation, the seams on the baseball. And you can see how the ball looks coming off the bat. I could see backspin as soon as I made contact, so I wasn't worried about it going foul. I knew it was going out.

Kirby Puckett always used to tell me, "A hanging breaking ball is a gift from God. Don't miss your blessing." I was thinking about Kirby, with a big smile, when I was running the bases. When I rounded third, I saw all the guys waiting for me at the plate. I took my leap and fell into that crowd of players, and it was awesome. After I did my interview on the field, I came to the clubhouse and they were waiting for me, dousing me with beer and water. I slid on the ground and pretended like I was swimming.

—AS TOLD TO LYLE SPENCER, MLB.COM

...To Give Up That Walk-Off Grand Slam

> BY JOE BOROWSKI, 37, CLEVELAND INDIANS



As a closer, you're the last line of defense, and I absolutely love it. I take the good with the bad. I don't ride roller coasters. In that situation with Torii Hunter, you've faced him before, and you've gotten him out before. You let the ball go—it was a slider on a

1-0 count—and you know the second it comes out of your hand that it's not exactly going where you want it to, the way it has 90 percent of the time. To see him swing and hit it is the ultimate deflation. It's almost like you see it in slow motion. I saw him hit it and just knew it was out, and I started walking off the field. You feel like you've let everybody down. We fought to get back in that game. It's not easy.

—AS TOLD TO ANTHONY CASTROVINCE, MLB.COM

17 miles / -165 feet / 12:25 p.m. You're sweating a lot, although it evaporates so quick, it's hard to monitor. That's the tricky thing out there. It's so dry. Sweat doesn't

even get a chance to appear. My stomach wasn't feeling great. I got passed by Ferg [Hawke, second-place finisher]. There's a sense of loneliness, of feeling really small

out in that landscape. 42 miles / 0 feet / 4:25 p.m. I submerged my body in this king-sized cooler of ice water. That was like heaven. It's like putting an

ice cube in a skillet. I was a new person after that. Eighty miles left. The temperature was dropping back down toward 100, and I took off the pants. My legs felt

What Pros Ride On Their Own Time

We asked four American heroes of motorcycle racing to help choose the **BEST BIKES OF 2007**. By *Eddie Alterman*

PRICE
\$16,775
ENGINE
Boxer 2-cylinder
DISPLACEMENT
1,170 cc

THE EXPLORER

BMW R 1200 GS Adventure

BMW motorcycles, unlike BMW cars, have a reputation for being a bit hairy around the back and ears; they're the kind of bikes old guys ride if they're too snooty to be seen on a Gold Wing. But the R 1200 GS goes a long way toward upending that image. This bike has a bit of Mad Max about it, with vestigial fairings and a sort of utilitarian clutter below the belt. Under there, its smooth-running boxer twin produces 100 hp and 85 lb-ft of torque. This is a bigger yet lighter evolution of the bike that actors Ewan McGregor and Charley Boorman rode on their 2004 global excursion, and they chose the GS series for its camel-like ability to cross inhospitable distances unfazed. Geoff Aaron's sold on it, too. "It has almost nine gallons of fuel, a GPS, storage for all your stuff, and knobby tires for when the road gets tough," he says. "The thing makes me want to go explore the world."



THE CRUISER

Harley-Davidson Dyna Super Glide

PRICE
\$12,395
ENGINE
Twin-cam 96
DISPLACEMENT
1,584 cc



If Marlon Brando weren't fat and also quite dead, this is what he'd ride. Harley's rootsy factory chopper, the Dyna Super Glide is the modern incarnation of the kind of low-slung bikes that gave rebellion wheels. It's simply as American as Levi's, baseball, and teenage smoking. Even MotoGP star Nicky Hayden can't resist its charms. "There is something about riding a chopper that feels cool," he says. "And a good piece of American iron makes a guy proud to be an American."

THE CROTCH ROCKET

Honda CBR1000RR

PRICE
\$11,499
ENGINE
Inline 4-cylinder
DISPLACEMENT
998 cc



"This has got about all most people can handle," Nicky Hayden says. In completely overhauling its ultimate sports bike, in 2006, Honda made sure that comfort and stability weren't sacrificed on the altar of raw speed. So while the rider sits hunched, in a low-center-of-gravity tuck, he needn't worry about singeing his legs; Honda has supplied ducts in the cowlings to route engine heat away from the rider. "The best thing about it, though," says Hayden, "is that it has room for two."

THE EXPERT PANEL

Four of the world's best professional motorcycle racers



NICKY HAYDEN
Age: 25 Event: MotoGP
Significant wins: 2005/'06
Red Bull U.S. Grand Prix
winner; 2006 MotoGP
World Champion (nickyhayden.com)



TRAVIS PASTRANA
Age: 23 Events: Supercross, Rally America
Significant wins: Eight X
Games golds; 2000 AMA
MotoCross Champ (travis-pastrana.com)



GEOFF AARON
Age: 34 Event: Trials
Significant wins: Ten-time
AMA National Trials champion; 73 career National
Trials wins (ereonline.com)



STEVE HENGEVELD
Age: 32
Event: Off-road enduro
Significant wins: Five-time
Baja 1000 overall winner
(2002-'06) (hengeracing.com)



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duke of hazard
nicky hayden

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84 **STATUS REPORT** London's elite descend on the Serpentine Gallery to welcome an American Prince. By Hudson Morgan

88 **THE EXAMINED LIFE** Playboy, gambler, rake, rogue: A rendezvous in Paris with a mysterious woman reveals a father's shadowy life. By Tom Sykes

CRITICS

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104 **BOOKS** In *Nothing To Be Frightened Of*, Julian Barnes offers a wry assessment of where we're all heading—the grave. By Tim Adams

109 **ART BOOKS** *Vanity Fair* revisits 95 years of iconic portraiture. By Tasha Green

110 **SPOTLIGHT** She has no trouble playing the temptress in *Crossing Over*—but Alice Eve has headier challenges in mind. By Michael Walker

112 **THEATER** He's traveled from Broadway to film to TV and back again, but don't expect *All My Sons* star John Lithgow to settle down anytime soon. By Nicholas Mosquera

green
means go p.140



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THREADS

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124 **IN THE BAG** Three real men hunt for a fall wardrobe, returning spruced up and unscathed. By Tasha Green

REGIMEN

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uncommon
grounds p.182



**DON'T
TREAD ON ME**

Kentucky-born
MotoGP champ
Nicky Hayden guns
it around a corner.



MAN FROM OZ
Golf legend and
business mogul
Greg Norman in the
Florida home of his
wife, Chris Evert.

tentious nonsense but with terms like "rock 'n' roll," "T and A," and even, in the case of a 45-year-old Burgundy, a proctological epithet or two. By the way, if you're in the market for a decent Champagne, you want to might try a 1914 Pol Roger.

Since looking back in time is often the only way forward, Tom Sykes made great strides by going in search of his father's mysterious life as a sometime art dealer, gambler, rake, and good-natured scamp. Shak-

This issue is a panoramic appreciation of the idea that only the ultimate will do. Perfection, of course, is often female—meet actress Alice Eve. But it can also be bottled, and no one is more zealous in his pursuit of it than the wine auctioneer John Kapon, a man on speed dial for the world's richest wine geeks. As Jay McInerney discovers in a series of slightly over-

served sessions with his posse of alpha oenophiles, the Angry Men, Kapon and co.'s tasting notes are filled not with pre-

ing the branches of his family tree, he eventually found his dad's first wife—and some hard truths along the way. We're lucky to have another Sykes—his big sister Plum—in these pages with a piece about the artist Daniel Chadwick, whose 19th-century Gothic mansion in Gloucestershire comes with another paternal legacy: a futuristic sculpture garden full of works by his late father, Lynn Chadwick.

Incongruity and paternalism pop up in another piece, too, about a group of intrepid Western bankers who journey to Kenya—a country that saw some of the worst violence in its history early this year—in an attempt at a modern-day gold rush of commodities deals. But it's senior writer Kevin Conley's cover profile of Eli Manning—Patriot slayer, competitive brother, newlywed husband, Zegna wearer, and NFL superhero—that reveals a life of true fortune. In fact, there might be only one thing Manning still needs: a pair of Lobbys.



Jay Fielder

FALL FRENZY



artist in residence
p.182



sweaters
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French tasting
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classic accessories
p.194



tailored suits
p.150



sports directly
p.164

Nothing captures the thrill of change quite like autumn. This issue we honor the regenerative season with—shall we say—a cornucopia of goodness: popping open the *finest vintages* on the rare wine circuit; mixing and matching sharply *tailored suits* till they get as much mileage as the new fuel-efficient *Porsche 911*; punching up a classic briefcase or loafer with Crayola colors; and talking *football* with the quarterback of the year.

TRUCK
STOP

Nicky Hayden rests easy at the Honda test track in Comona, California. Milo sweater, \$790, made it. John Varvatos plaid button-down, \$110, mottled jeans, \$225, and black boot-up shoes, \$345. johnvarvatos.com.


duke of hazard

A red and white Red Bull MotoGP motorcycle with the number 14 is parked on a dirt track. The background shows a desert landscape with rolling hills under a clear sky. The motorcycle has a prominent Red Bull logo on the side and a number plate with the number 14. The handlebars have a 'YAMAHA' logo. The overall scene is set in a dry, arid environment.

When MotoGP world champion Nicky Hayden finds himself in harm's way, this season's sturdy sweaters will break the fall.

By Dan Neil

Photographed by Norman Jean Roy



"When you're hanging it out, you're going to crash—and when you go down it hurts," Hayden says. "This sport is real. But, you know, I chose this game."

nicky Hayden is not, just off a flight from Germany, where he came in dead last on his Repsol-sponsored Honda, the 2006 MotoGP world champion is weary and in a bit of a funk. "Man, it was a complete disaster," he says, and...whoa, whoa, what's with the accent?

Hayden, 27, who grew up in the Bluegrass State and is known as "the Kentucky Kid," has one of the wildest, most charmingly delicious Southern accents y'all ever did hear. Honestly, the kid makes Boss Hogg sound like Noel Coward.

In any event, it's been a long, frustrating season for Hayden, so much so that the paddock chatter in MotoGP—the two-wheel equivalent of Formula One, where races are won at speeds upward of 205 mph—has him defecting from his longtime team, Honda (he'll be a free agent at the end of the year). One thing's for sure: Hayden is a motorcycle prodigy, having won on everything he's ever thrown a leg over. At 18, he was Rookie of the Year in the AMA Grand National Championships. At 21, he was the youngest-ever AMA Superbike champion. By 25, he was MotoGP world champion, ending the four-year reign of Valentino Rossi, whom many consider the greatest road racer in the history of the sport.

All of which is to say that losing does not sit well with Hayden. Pretty much like it sat with the Confederates at Appomattox. "You know, there are times when you get hot and

MOTOR MOUTH

Hayden lives for big crowds, racing in front of 120,000 fans at 205 mph. Brunello Cucinelli cashmere sweater, \$1,160; brunellocucinelli.com. Polo by Ralph Lauren checked shirt, \$89.50; and jeans, \$165; ralphlauren.com. Graphic: Paul Stuart cashmere-and-wool turtleneck, \$147; paulstuart.com. Earnest Seven jeans, \$195; earnestseven.com.



rolling," he says, "and then you have a few injuries or whittoset and get the ball against you. You got to be a hardheaded hard-ass."

As we speak, his brothers—Tommy and Roger Lee, stars in the AMA—are nearby, scing down various scrapes and broken bones they've received in combat. The three brothers share a house in Orange, California, where they train and get in some supermotard riding. Have his brothers' recent injuries made him think twice about racing? "Look, when you're hanging it out, you're going to crash—and when you go down, it hurts," he says. "This sport is real. But, you know, I chose this game."

Talking to Hayden, you get the feeling that he'd rather take a hard spell than climb back on a plane and return to Europe. Now in his sixth season and one of the few Americans in the sport, he confesses to not having taken much to Europe. He likes Barcelona O.K., but generally avoids Belgium, where the team is headquartered. "It rains all the time there,"

Hayden says. You can take the boy out of the country, as they say, but you can't get

him to like escargots. And although he's not a fan of continental food, he no longer sneers at sparkling water. He also admits to a little frustration when Japanese fans constantly ask him about Kentucky's various contributions to world culture, such as its fried chicken.

"All they know about Kentucky is KFC," he says, exasperated.

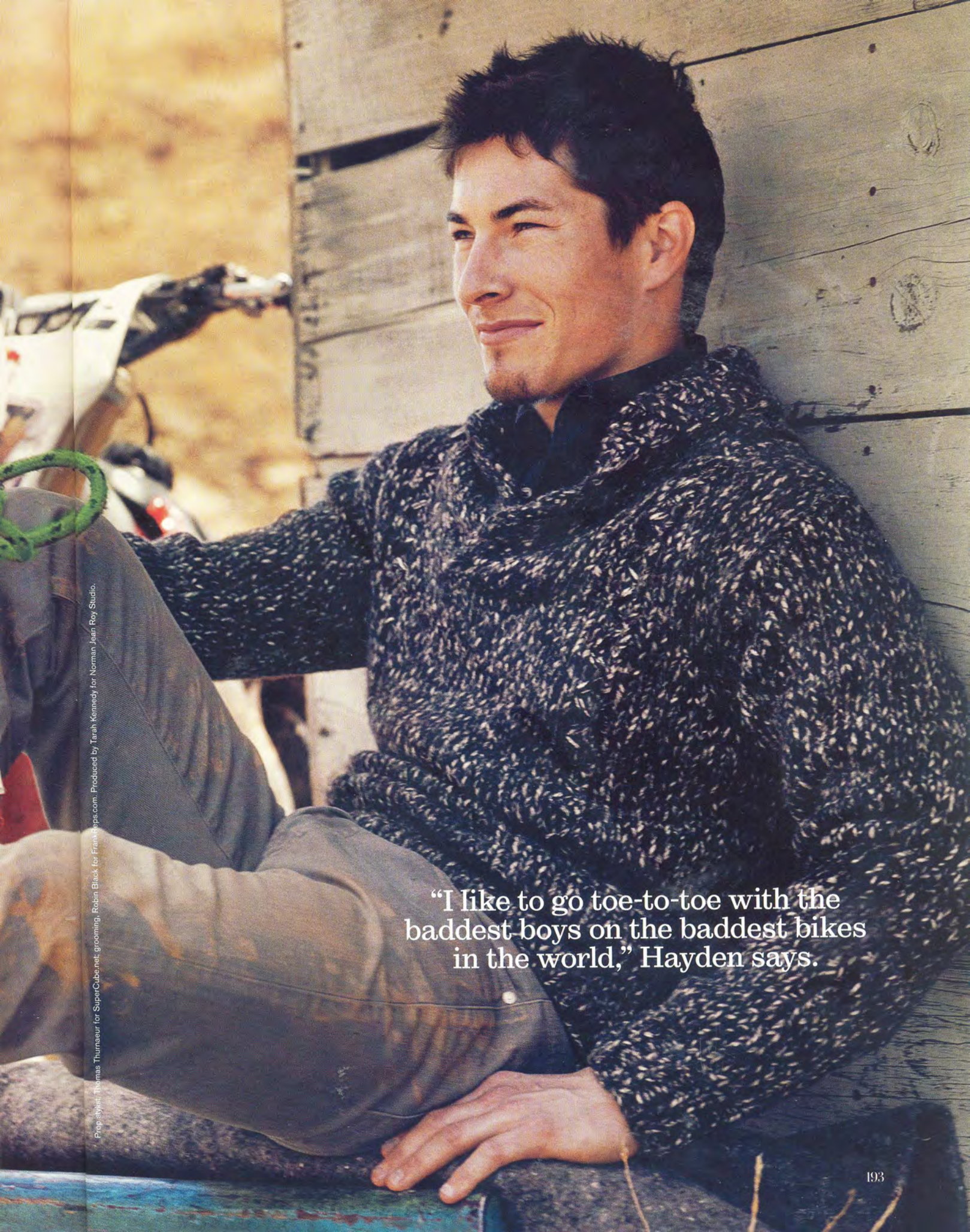
So why does Hayden stay in MotoGP, when he could choose—indeed, likely dominate—American road racing and be closer to center of the universe, Kentucky? "I like to go toe-to-toe with the badass boys on the badass bikes in the world," he says, which is also why he doesn't currently want the distraction of a girlfriend. "The tracks are better. There's more passion. MotoGP has got a bigger audience. I really enjoy racing in front of that audience."

He enjoys winning in front of it, too. "I remember when I won the world championship, I had the American flag on my shoulder and the national anthem playing and 120,000 fans cheering me," he says. "That motivates me every day to get up with the sun." ☐

KENTUCKY KID

Racing in 18 MotoGP circuits in 16 countries, Hayden enjoys every chance to be back in the good old U.S. of A. Perry Ellis wool field sweater, price upon request, perryellis.com. Acne shirt, \$225, acnestudios.com. Hugo Boss jeans, \$175, 1.800.HUGOBOS. Red Wing boots, \$218, redwingshoe.com.

Fashion Editor:
Alvaro Salazar



Prop stylist: Thomas Thurneier for SuperCube.net; grooming: Robin Black for Franki's.com. Produced by Tarah Kennedy for Norman Jean Roy Studio.

"I like to go toe-to-toe with the baddest boys on the baddest bikes in the world," Hayden says.



The Kentucky Kid

FITNESS—AND A FIERCE PASSION TO WIN—HELPS GOOD OLD BOY NICKY HAYDEN STAY IN THE CHASE FOR MOTOGP SUPREMACY | **By Justin Tejada**

When motorcycle racer Nicky

Hayden showed up at the Red Bull Indianapolis Grand Prix in September, there was a tiny sticker on a piece of his equipment. "Rule No. 76: No Excuses. Play Like a Champion," it read. Now before you write that off as just another empty sports cliché, consider the equipment the sticker was attached to: crutches.

Hayden had a broken bone in his heel but was still prepared to pilot his motorcycle at speeds approaching 200 miles per hour in the first MotoGP race at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. He led for

12 laps and finished second behind five-time world champion and current points leader Valentino Rossi.

True to his "no excuses" mantra, Hayden didn't blame his finish on his bum leg. "Getting on the podium is good. But honestly, I'm greedy. I want to win," he said. Hayden won the MotoGP world championship in 2006, ending Rossi's five-year reign, and wants nothing more than to get back to the top. "Once you've tasted blood and had that success," he says, "there's no going back to just being a

contender and being happy with it."

MotoGP is like the Formula 1 of motorcycle racing. The 59- to 80-mile MotoGP races take place on tracks filled with sharp turns that force riders to lean their bikes over to gravity-defying degrees. These machines have nothing in common with even the most souped-up street bikes. The 800cc MotoGP bikes cost millions of dollars to build, and they're capable of g-forces strong enough that the rider feels as if his helmet (and maybe his head) is going to fly off. But riders must stay focused enough to



Hayden must be strong and flexible to navigate tight turns at high speeds.

smoothly "dive" the bike into turns and weave their way through competitors. It's not uncommon for a rider to finish a race and find rubber from an opponent's tires on his leather suit.

Hayden, 27, grew up at the end of a gravel road in rural Owensboro, Ky., and still speaks with a twang that causes him to leave off the s and run his words together when he says things like "200 mileanhour."

Motorcycle racing was a family affair in the Hayden household. Earl Hayden, Nicky's father, raced motorcycles for 20 years. Nicky still uses the same number as his dad, 69. (Earl said he picked the number because when he crashed, it looked the same upside down as right-side up.) Even Nicky's mom, Rose, raced. No wonder their three sons, Tommy, Nicky, and Roger, and even one of their two daughters all took to the sport. Having a racetrack in the backyard didn't hurt, either.

Tommy and Nicky have successful careers on the American Superbike circuit, but Nicky has always stood out from the crew because of his dogged work ethic.

"When he was about 2 years old with diapers, and snot running out of his nose, he was begging me to let him go ride the motorcycle," says Earl. "He was the first one on the

track, and the last one to leave. He just wanted to ride all the time."

During a three-week break from the MotoGP circuit in August, Hayden entered the Supermoto event in August's X Games and landed badly on a jump, injuring his foot. "Looking back now, it was not a smart decision," he says. "But I just love racing motorcycles. It doesn't matter if it's a MotoGP in front of 100,000 people or racing my brothers in my backyard. I truly love the sport, and I think that keeps me hungry."

That appetite is what has Hayden so pumped for the 2009 season. You can't win MotoGP races on guts alone. Hayden stokes his passion with a fitness regimen that allows him to endure, even through injury.

"Fitness makes a big difference on the bike," he says. "Once you physically get a little tired, you mentally start making mistakes and that's when you get hurt. And when you fall off these bikes, it don't exactly tickle."

The day after the Indianapolis race, Hayden announced that he was leaving the Honda team, with which he had raced throughout his MotoGP career, to join the renowned Ducati squad. Call it passion: Ducati's Desmosedici bike better suits Hayden's aggressive riding style and gives him a great shot to win another world title in '09. **MT**

GETTING FIT FOR GP

The physical demands on MotoGP riders are immense, though often underappreciated. "Stick and ball athletes don't really think of us as athletes, which is a shame," says pro Nicky Hayden. To stay track fit, Hayden has worked with personal trainer Aldon Baker. Here's his program:

CARDIO VERSUS BULK

"You can't be some big beefcake guy, that'll just slow your acceleration down," says Hayden. Baker's program has him doing a mix of cardio every day. The workouts involve a mix of endurance and high-intensity running and cycling. Nicky has a stationary bike set up in his garage.

POWER YOGA

"Nicky needs more flexibility because he's gotta stay in a weird position for the race," says Baker. An added benefit of the yoga is that it helps Hayden control his breathing, which is important for staying relaxed on the track.

STRENGTH WORKOUTS

Hayden is in the gym approximately three times a week. "I'm all about doing combination exercises," says Baker, who favors stepups with dumbbells instead of squats and adding leg curls to a stability-ball bridge.

MY FIRST CAR...

"It was a Ford Fairmont station wagon that my parents let me drive. Now I've got a couple [of cars]. I've got a Ferrari and a Porsche Cayenne."

—Chuck Liddell, UFC light-heavyweight fighter



Scorecard

Week Ahead

What to watch and watch for By Chris Mannix

SATURDAY 7/22

Arturo Gatti vs. Carlos Baldomir When the unheralded Baldomir (42-9-6) took the WBC welterweight belt from Zab Judah back in January, he had to chase the überquick Judah around the ring to do it. He shouldn't have trouble finding Gatti (40-7), a brawler who's not afraid to go toe-to-toe with anyone. The fight in Atlantic City is Baldomir's first title defense. **HBO 10 p.m.**

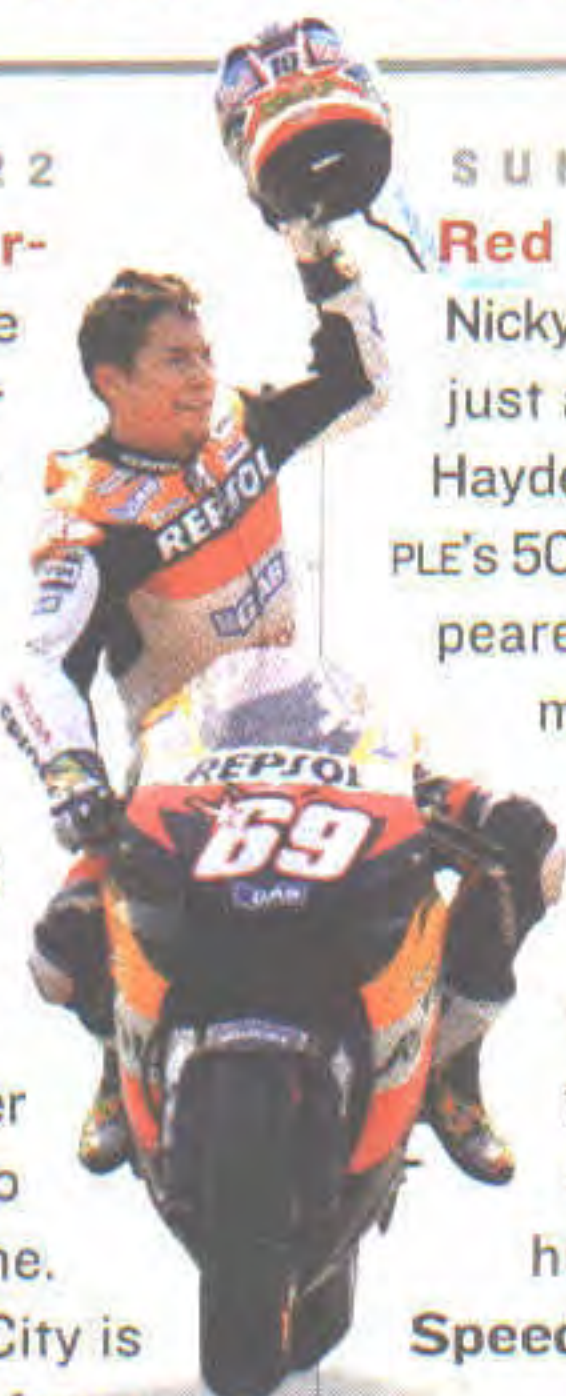
CFL: Argonauts at Roughriders

Is it time to pull the plug on the Ricky Williams experiment? Williams was signed by the Argonauts to produce yards, wins and fans. The result? Williams is averaging just 53.5 yards per game, Toronto is 1-3, and attendance is down by 3,200. Not quite what the Argos had in mind when they made Williams (left) the league's highest-paid back at \$240,000 for the season. **Check listings**



SUNDAY 7/23

Red Bull U.S. Grand Prix Nicky Hayden (left) is more than just a pretty face. (Last year Hayden was named one of PEOPLE's 50 hottest bachelors and appeared in a Dating Game segment on *Today*.) He's one of the top motorcycle racers around: After finishing third in the MotoGP series last year, the 24-year-old is atop the standings as the bikers head to Monterey, Calif. **Speed Channel 5 p.m.**



Pennsylvania 500 Jeff Gordon will never match Dale Earnhardt's popularity, but he's one trip to victory lane away from matching his career win total (76). Taking the checkered flag in Pocono would help Gordon with more immediate concerns as well: He's clinging to the last spot in the Chase for the Championship. **TNT 2 p.m.**

TUESDAY 7/25

In Stores: The Benchwarmers DVD David Spade, Rob Schneider and Napoleon Dynamite himself, Jon Heder, play lovable losers who form



a three-man team that takes on Little League bullies in director Dennis Dugan's screwball comedy.

WEDNESDAY 7/26

Reds at Astros With seven teams within 4½ games of the NL wild-card spot, the dealing started early. Last week Houston added Devil Rays third



THURSDAY 7/20

English Patients

Tiger Woods and Phil Mickelson both hope that the hop across the pond for the British Open will be the first step on the road to recovery. Woods (left), who lost his father to cancer on May 3, watched the final two rounds of the U.S. Open after missing the cut in a major for the first time. What he saw was pretty ugly: Mickelson (right) blowing the Open with a double bogey on the 72nd hole. Still, the world's top two players will be favored at Royal Liverpool, where Woods can become the first player since Tom Watson (1983) to win two straight Opens. **Thursday and Friday TNT 7 a.m.; Saturday TNT 7 a.m., ABC 9 a.m.; Sunday TNT 6 a.m., ABC 8 a.m.**

baseman Aubrey Huff to a lineup that is batting a league-worst .257, while the Reds went a long way toward solving their closer problems—they've blown 14 saves this season—by acquiring former All-Star Eddie Guardado (left) from Seattle. **Check listings**





THE QUESTIONS

WITH

Nicky Hayden

Grand Prix Motorcycling Champ



What was your welcome-to-pro-motorcycling moment? Standing on the podium in Australia midway through my rookie year [2003]. It was a good feeling, seeing the huge crowd and watching them raise my flag.

Your most embarrassing moment?

Racing in Wisconsin, I jumped the start. Not by a little—I jumped way too big. I made a grade-school error and got to look like a fool on live TV.

If I weren't racing motorcycles, I'd be...

That's tough. I've been racing my whole life. So have my brothers. My dad did it. I tried other sports, but I didn't have a good jump shot and I couldn't hit a fastball. In school I was pretty terrible—so this has been my meal ticket. I guess I'd be back in Owensboro, Kentucky, working at my dad's used car lot buffing cars.

If I were commissioner for a day,

I'd... add another race in the U.S. [to two per year]. Spain's got three races. We could have one in Florida or Atlanta—somewhere close to home.

LAST WEEK

Hayden's July 23 victory in Los Angeles kept him in first place in the MotoGP standings—the only U.S. rider in the top six.

THIS WEEK

Hayden, 25, will be training at home in Owensboro, in advance of the Aug. 20 Czech Grand Prix.

• DUGOUT PASTIMES

Saving Faces

Carving—and jinxing?—teammates in Styrofoam



MICHELANGELO, DA VINCI, Botticelli... Baldelli? Devil Rays outfielder Rocco Baldelli (above) may not rank among the Italian masters, but he has made a lasting contribution to art, one that won't biodegrade for 2,000 years. While on the bench during a long recovery from assorted injuries, Baldelli, 24, doodled on Styrofoam coffee cups, using a sunflower seed as

his stylus. Soon, he was carving portraits of teammates—each took about five innings to complete—and refining his technique. "I'd need a sharp seed to do the outlines," he says, "then I'd use the dull end to do the shading."

Baldelli did three portraits. Pitcher Mark Hendrickson was "shocked" by the resemblance; catcher Toby Hall admires Baldelli's rendering of facial hair ("long, fuzzy little chin hair, eyebrows, everything"). But all agree Baldelli's masterpiece is his Julio Lugo. "Impressive," says the shortstop. "The mustache he got right, and the nose, that's the difficult part."

The subsequent trading of all three of Baldelli's subjects has led some in Tampa Bay's clubhouse to joke that his pieces have a dark side. That may be why he never did a self-portrait—"It'd be one ugly picture," he says—before his return to the lineup interrupted his art career. Says Baldelli of his Styrofoam series, "It's a real limited edition." —Ben Reiter



Julio Lugo

Mark Hendrickson

Toby Hall

The Pop Culture Grid



How do sports stars fit in?

Most expensive thing in your closet?

Has seen Pirates of the Caribbean?

Singer or musician you'd most like to be

Favorite comfort food?

Book you can't wait to read?

Pamela Anderson is...

IAN KINSLER
Rangers 2B

Hugo Boss cashmere jacket

Saw the beginning but fell asleep

Justin Timberlake

Pecan pie

The Da Vinci Code

Going on a lot of years

MIKE MAGEE
Red Bulls F

My collection of Nike sneakers

Yes

MC Hammer

Italian beef, cheese fries and chocolate malt

Snake: An Autobiography of Youri Djorkaeff

Certainly not lacking strong attributes

JASON MARQUIS
Cardinals P

My wife's jewelry

No

Billy Joel

Vanilla ice cream

I don't read that much

Sexy

TANGELA SMITH
Sting F-C

Gucci backpack

Yes

Beyoncé

Any type of soul food

What They Want (Omar Tyree)

Canadian

MICHAEL HEAPE (2. BALDELLI & CUPS); JOEL AUERBACH/US PRESSWIRE (LUGO); STEVE NESUS/AP (HENDRICKSON); DAVE CHENG/US PRESSWIRE (HALL); TONY AYER/AP (HAYDEN RIDING); TOM HEVEZ/AP (HAYDEN HEAD SHOT); DARREN CARROLL (KINSLER); TONY QUINN/WIREIMAGE.COM (MAGEE); DAVID E. KLUTHO (MARQUIS); ANDREW D. BERNSTEIN/ALAMY (SMITH); SULENA VISTA PICTURES/PHOTOFEST (PIRATES); THEO WARDS/WIREIMAGE.COM (HAMMER); KARL WALTER/GETTY IMAGES (JOEL); COURTESY OF MIKE (SHOE); DENISE TRUSCELLO/WIREIMAGE.COM (ANDERSON)

PEOPLE

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A full-page photograph of Nicky Hayden, a professional motorcycle racer. He is standing next to his red and white Honda motorcycle. He is wearing a white sleeveless shirt with the Red Bull logo, black and white racing pants, and a racing helmet. He is smiling at the camera.

Daredevils

Driven by the thrill of victory and the agony of sitting still, they will get your blood pumping

Nicky Hayden

MOTORCYCLIST

AGE: 23 In his third year of racing for Honda on the top international circuit, the "Kentucky Kid" will compete in July's Red Bull U.S. Grand Prix.

"Racing is what I grew up doing—it's in my family's blood," says Hayden, who turned pro at 16 and has two brothers who are also on the American circuit. Job requirement? "It's important to be small and light," he says. Off the track, he's lighthearted. "I'm pretty happy-go-lucky." Find him in the departure lounge, going to his next race. "I travel so much, I've met a lot of chicks in airports."

FLOYD LANDIS, UNFORGIVEN
IN THE BUNKER WITH
CYCLING'S NO. 1 PARIKH
BY SARA CORBETT

AL DAVIS LIVES!
ADVENTURES IN RAIDERS
FOOTBALL
BY BRYAN CURTIS

NICKY HAYDEN: NICE
AMERICAN SPEED FREAK

LET'S GO ANOTHER 500K
THE CURIOUS LIFE OF
AN ENDURANCE ADDICT

DEADLY WHEN SHE WANTS TO BE

SERENA WILLIAMS HAS OUR ATTENTION. DOES TENNIS HAVE HERS?

BY SUSAN DOMINUS

MIKE MUSSINA ON HOW TO PITCH
TO DAVID ORTIZ

PRIME-TIME FOOTBALL
MESSSES (A LITTLE) WITH TEXAS

NICE LOBES: HOW
EXERCISE MAKES YOU SMARTER

THE BRAY OF PIGS: PITY
THE FEMALE SIDELINE REPORTER

WIN.

WIPE OUT.

A TRACK AT 20

IN TH



REPEAT

NICKY HAYDEN CAN FLY AROUND
MILES PER HOUR BETTER THAN JUST ABOUT ANYONE. THAT IS, WHEN
HE'S UPRIGHT. THE BUMPY RIDE OF AN AMERICAN
EXTREMELY FAST LANE.
BY JOSH DEAN



S

So this was how the day would end for Nicky Hayden, rag-dolling through the rain at 140 miles per hour, his season shattered like his motorcycle, a multimillion-dollar machine depreciating rapidly as it shed chunks of titanium and carbon fiber in the gravel shoulder area where Hayden would eventually skid to a stop. "That's a huge crash!" the Eurosport TV announcer howled, a fairly obvious observation to anyone who had just watched the white, orange and black Honda dip into a corner of the wet track and chuck Hayden, the reigning Moto Grand Prix road-racing world champion, into the air just two laps from a fourth-place finish that he desperately needed.

For nearly 45 minutes, at speeds up to 180 miles per hour, Hayden had fought his way back from 12th place at the Alice Grand Prix de France, in Le Mans, despite a balky bike and torrential rain that caused half a dozen riders to crash. But feeling the pressure of Italy's Valentino Rossi — probably the greatest road racer of all time and an iconic, curly-haired presence who looms over MotoGP — Hayden came into a corner a little too fast, causing him to brake harder than is prudent on a wet track. Before he could react it was, as he would later say, "sky, gravel, sky, gravel, sky, gravel."

In MotoGP, the most elite level of motorcycle racing, crashing is inevitable; it's not a matter of if but when. Learning how to crash, then, is a skill every racer develops: relax (relax!), bring your arms in to your body and let the protective suit do its job. "There's an art to it," Hayden says. If you're moving at 100 miles per hour, even a pool of water would feel like concrete. "So imagine what concrete feels like." Provided he is not unconscious or immobile, the racer takes inventory of his parts,

starting with his feet and working his way up until he's pretty sure everything is still functional.

There, just off the hallowed asphalt of Le Mans, the 26-year-old Hayden rose to his knees and slammed his fists into the ground. The TV camera cut to his pit, where the crew chief, Pete Benson, ripped the yellow placards from the board that displayed Hayden's standing and tossed them to the pavement. In a split second, the world champion lost any chance of retaining his title. Instead of earning 13 points toward his season total and finishing in front of all but one of the riders who led him in the rankings, Hayden earned no points and dropped out of the top 10.

Back at the hospitality tent for AlpineStars, an Italian company that makes the suit, gloves and boots that had kept Hayden's parts in working order, a smattering of journalists, friends and company men nosed shrimp cocktail in near silence.

Some minutes later, Hayden's manager, Phil Baker, appeared in the rain, carrying his client's battered racing suit over his shoulder like a sick child. "He's O.K.," Baker said. "Just tore some cartilage in his rib cage." A technician bagged the suit — covered with scuffs and scratches, but otherwise in decent shape — to be shipped home for autopsy. "It will make a comeback," the tech said.

Outside, trucks were idling and tents had begun to collapse. If you were so inclined, you could see it as a metaphor for Hayden's season to date, but it was just a typical mass dismantling at a Grand Prix track. Almost from the second a race concludes, the whole operation — hundreds of brightly painted trucks, air-conditioned hospitality tents, countless cooks and roadies and hawkers of merchandise — packs up and rolls out for the next stop, in this case Mugello, Italy.

Last to leave was the fleet of R.V.'s in which the riders lived for the weekend. And as the day ended at Le Mans, the mood in Hayden's trailer seemed funereal. The television was silent, frozen on the back of racer Marco Melandri, the words "2 Laps to Go" in the top right corner of the screen. Hayden had paused the tape at the moment immediately before his crash.

He was sitting in a recliner next to a stationary bike he uses to warm up before races, his stocking feet sunk in the tan pile carpet. He's a handsome kid with peaked eyebrows that give him a bit of a Cheshire Cat look, particularly when he's smiling. As the biggest American star in a sport largely comprising Europeans, Hayden knows how to make a personal statement. He likes to experiment with hair style and color — a low point being a buzz cut dyed with leopard spots — and has made a few feints in the direction of facial hair. The European news media have taken to calling him "Trick Daddy" or "the Kentucky Kid," and in 2005, he received the high honor of being named one of People magazine's "50 Hottest Bachelors." Both Michael Jordan and Brad Pitt have declared themselves fans, and Hayden is about to be the star of his own MTV reality show.

In his trailer, though, Hayden was merely the guy who choked. His expression was flat, his hair hidden under a Michelin beanie. He fidgeted absently with the remote. "I don't like watching other people crash, but I don't mind watching myself," he said and then replayed the tape.

Hayden is enormously dedicated; losing destroys him. When he's not racing, he's thinking about racing, or working out to get himself in racing shape, or else sitting in the garage with his race team, talking about racing. He has not been shy about expressing his frustration with the bike Honda Racing delivered for the 2007 season — a rule change forced all manufacturers to build slightly less powerful bikes and Honda's had so far been a disappointment — but on this day he accepted the blame. It is often said that Hayden, unique among his colleagues in that he grew up riding on dirt tracks, loves to go sideways and is comfortable

NOT IN KENTUCKY ANYMORE Nicky Hayden crashes in the rain — again — this time at the British Grand Prix on June 24 (previous page). The world champion a few weeks later, in Germany (right).

[Job Dean is an editor at Play.]



Roger Lee. (Not to mention Johnny Depp, who surely played one sport or another.)

To get to the Hayden family compound, you head around the back of a Kmart, through the parking lot, past the loading docks and over a railroad track where you'll find the sign for Earl's Lane, named for the Hayden family patriarch as a last resort because he couldn't come up with a variation on Hayden or Rose (that's Mrs. Hayden) that wasn't already registered somewhere in the county. In the founding days of the Hayden estate, the road had no name and the Haydens picked up their mail at a barbecue joint on the main drag, but when Rose opened a plant nursery, it seemed like a good idea to have an address. Also, Earl says a friend told him, "You can't just tell the fire trucks to come up the old dirt road."

Earl Hayden has always had a thing for motorcycles. He was a dirt track racer, and when it came time to settle on a girlfriend, it only made sense that she too would be compatible with the sport. As Earl tells it, Rose rode even faster than he did, and besides, he was a bit wild and prone to spills. Nicky chose the number 69 for his bike because that was his dad's number; Earl chose it because at read the same way whether he was upside down or right side up.

From almost the day they could walk without wobbling, Earl's three sons were planted on motor bikes and prepped to become racers. Four hours a day, seven days a week, he drilled the boys and also Jenny, the older of his two daughters, who would win an amateur national championship at 12 before giving up motorcycles for tennis. (The younger sister, Kathleen, rode too, if only to maintain the esprit de corps.) To pay the bills, Earl performed a variety of odd jobs. He raised

**'ANY YOUNG AMERICAN COMING IN,
90 PERCENT OF PEOPLE WANT TO SEE YOU FAIL.'
HAYDEN SAYS. 'THAT'S JUST THE REALITY,
AND NOTHING I DID WAS EVER GOOD ENOUGH.'**

when the back end is "loose," meaning unstable and sliding. So, yes, the rain fogged his visor and numbed his hands, but it also probably gave him a slight advantage. This one hurt.

"I know fourth isn't great, but it would have been by far my best result of the year," he said, his Kentucky twang absent of intonation. "And I let it get away."

I asked him if he ever thinks about last year, if it's at all helpful in moments like this to remember that he's still the world champion, the man who ended the reign of the great Rossi.

"Oh, from time to time fans bring up the poster" — he was referring to an image of himself at the final race of last season, on his knees next to his bike, weeping into his hands — "and it still puts a smile on my face. But it seems like a long time ago now."

Le Mans is like another world compared with Owensboro, Ky. (pop. 54,067) — known as "the QWB" to Hayden, its latest favorite son. For a small Ohio River town full of churches and car lots, Owensboro has proven to be a rather fecund sports breeding ground. Seven NASCAR drivers hail from there, including the brothers Waltrip and Green, as do the former N.B.A. shooting guard Rex Chapman, the Texas Rangers' outfielder Brad Wilkerson and the three Hayden boys: Tommy, Nicky and

thoroughbred horses, then opened a car wash and then a used-car lot, called 2nd Chance Auto Sales, which he runs to this day.

"Tommy's first race was a week before he was 3, with training wheels," Earl says, as if he were discussing a standard rite of passage for toddlers. "The week after, we took his training wheels off." Did the boys ever ride bicycles? It seems wrong to ask.

For 35 weekends a year, the Hayden family would pack the motorcycles, the lawn chairs, the tents, the coolers and the Frisbees into an old trailer with "Earl's Race Team" painted on the side and hit the road, moving from dirt track to dirt track until the boys began to gain some notice. Tommy was the first to be signed to a sponsored team, but once word got out that he had an even faster younger brother, Nicky soon followed, and the whole ritual has repeated itself with Roger Lee. All three of them would win multiple national amateur championships and turn professional before graduating from high school, eventually advancing to the top level of racing in the United States, the American Motorcyclist Association Superbike Series, where Tommy and Roger Lee still race today. (Superbikes are one step down from MotoGP, the primary difference being that superbikes are modified general-production motorcycles, while G.P. bikes are prototypes and don't share a single part with showroom models.)

Although all the Haydens were talented, Nicky was even more so.

Tommy was three years older, but when the two faced head-to-head Nicky would inevitably catch and pass his brother. "That didn't bother Tommy," Rose Hayden says. "He knew it was coming." Perhaps Nicky was merely born with a little bit more Earl in him. "Nicky's been talking about being world champion since he was 5 or 6 years old," Earl says, "back when he was reading *Cycle News* by flashlight."

You would be forgiven for thinking this is a familiar formative tale — domineering father forces his kids to give up their childhoods to chase his own unfulfilled dreams, working them by firelight, er, flashlight — but to visit Earl's Lane is to find a contented clan.

"I know what opportunity I've got here, and I don't want to let it get away," says Nicky. "Winning races is the best feeling in the world, and I just feel guilty if I do anything that is going to affect my performance. I just feel like I'd be letting a lot of people down if I didn't take this as seriously as I do. I don't take shortcuts, am not a party boy, don't get caught up chasing girls." This is not directed at Valentino Rossi, but it could be. Like many famous racers past and present, the Italian has shown an affinity for the perks of fame. Hayden, less so. (This is not to suggest that he's monkish, by the way; just that he's not nightclubbing or autographing breasts.) "If I do my job right — work now and play later — I won't have to worry about it," he says.

Hayden is gone most of the year, but when he's home, he lives in an apartment above the six-car garage behind his parents' house. Until he left the United States for MotoGP in 2003, he still shared his childhood bedroom with Roger Lee; Rog, as he's known, has since moved next door, to a stone house across the pasture where Earl's fluffy white alpacas graze. Tommy lives nearby with his fiancée and her daughter. Every evening at 6, Rose sets out dinner, and whoever is in town comes by to eat, including various friends and extended family.

"My first year was tough," Hayden says. "Not only was I trying to learn the bikes, everything was so new. The traveling, the way of life..." The thought trails off for a second. "I think coming from a big family made it a little bit harder, because I grew up with two brothers and we were really close. We were together day in and day out, riding, training, practicing, and then all of a sudden..."

Today all three Hayden boys have a retinue of agents, managers and trainers, and so Earl mostly just provides moral support. He and Rose split up the travel duties, one heading overseas to be with Nicky, the other to wherever Tommy and Roger Lee happen to be racing in the

AMA Superbike Series. The entire family (except Kathleen, who was in school at the University of Kentucky) were there in Valencia, Spain, last October to celebrate with Nicky when he dethroned Rossi and won the world championship. "One of the proudest moments I've had at a race-track for sure," Tommy recalls.

For one weekend every July, worlds collide when both MotoGP and the AMA Superbike Series hold events in Laguna Seca, Calif., meaning that it's possible to see three Haydens flying around the same track as the rest of the Haydens cheer from the stands.

"I don't think they'll ever totally retire," Rose says, when asked to imagine what it will be like when the Hayden boys hang up their leathers and there are suddenly 52 open weekends on the calendar. "It's pretty much all they know."

But for argument's sake, what would she and Earl do?

"Have a life," she says.

To view it from here in America, MotoGP seems pretty marginal, but it's actually a global phenomenon that Mario Andretti, who would probably know, recently called "the most exciting form of motor sports." The circuit has 18 races (held in 16 countries), and more than 300 million viewers tune in to watch each of them. As many as 200,000 fans turn out in person, legions of them arriving by motorcycle, in full leathers worn for the entire weekend, which is a little like wearing knickers and golf spikes to the Masters. On Fridays, in locations as far-flung as Qatar and Malaysia, the racers practice and experiment with their bike setups, testing tires and tinkering with things like traction control until the rider feels the bike is optimized for that particular track. The qualifying laps come on Saturdays, when riders jockey for the all-important start position: they make a pit stop toward the end of the one-hour session to switch from regular practice tires to ultraslick (and ultrasoft) ones that will produce the fastest lap times of the weekend but can also begin to disintegrate after one or two laps; thus, they are useless for races. There are no pit stops during an actual race: riders must complete the entire 60- to 80-mile course on a single 21-liter tank of gas and on the same tires. So carefully calibrated are the bike computers that racers will often run

RIDERS WANTED, ORPHANS PREFERRED **MOTOGP BY THE NUMBERS**



202 **NICKY HAYDEN'S TOP SPEED**, reached at the Chinese Grand Prix in May: MotoGP bikes, which weigh about 300 pounds and produce more than 220 horsepower, are among the fastest accelerating machines on earth (0 to 62 in 2.1 seconds); at full throttle, their engines rev at more than 18,000 r.p.m.



60+ **THE MAXIMUM LEAN ANGLE** (in degrees) of a rider while he's cornering. Only a tiny patch of the rubber (smaller than a credit card) keeps the motorcycle on the road. Hayden's knees, which actually slide on the pavement in the corners, are covered with hard plastic protectors. By race's end, they are almost worn through.



4.0 **THE NUMBER OF SECONDS** it would take a Grand Prix bike to go from 0 to 52 m.p.h. and back to 0. Remarkably, G.P. bikes can decelerate more quickly than they can accelerate, thanks to huge carbon fiber disc brakes. When braking at maximum power, a rider rises up, and uses wind resistance to help slow down, as in the photo of Hayden above.

THE BIKES ROAR WITH SUCH FEROCITY THAT IT'S DAMAGING TO THE EAR TO STAND NEAR THEM. THE SOUND CAN APPROACH 130 DECIBELS, OR ONLY SLIGHTLY LESS THAN THAT OF A 747 AT TAKEOFF.

out of gas on their cool-down laps, riding on the last threads of their tires more or less 45 minutes after they started.

Up to 20 riders compete in each race, starting on the grid in rows of three. Starting position is crucial: a rider can't run at full throttle until he's clear of the field; as long as someone is in front of him, he has to ride carefully and wait for a chance to pass, meaning that any riders who can get in front of the traffic tend to build big leads. The first corner is critical, and one of the most important skills a rider can have is the ability to launch off the starting line within milliseconds of the gun without overpowering the bike and popping a wheelie. For a while, manufacturers were experimenting with computerized launch control, but in a rare victory of man over machine, all have reverted to the old-fashioned hand throttle.

Like Formula 1, MotoGP is a technological arms race, the nuances of which could sizzle your synapses. Every single piece of a bike — every bolt and screw — is custom-made, making the machines almost impossible to value. The result is a mechanized sculpture able to go from 0 to 60 miles per hour in just over two seconds. Each bike is a work in progress, tinkered with after every ride and modified to suit track and weather conditions or a racer's "feel" at that particular moment. Once fired up, the motorcycles roar with such ferocity that it's damaging to the ear to stand near them. At full throttle, the sound of a MotoGP bike can approach 130 decibels, or only slightly less than that of a 747 at takeoff.

"The bikes are designed to do everything as perfectly as possible," says Neil Spalding, a British motor sports journalist and the author of the book "MotoGP Technology." "They achieve unbelievably well when they're correct, but they're absolutely horrible when they're not. Finding that sweet spot is difficult."

There are any number of theories why MotoGP has not caught on in the United States, including the fact that races tend to take place overseas (the three-year-old Red Bull U.S. Grand Prix at Laguna Seca has been the only American stop on the MotoGP tour, though Indianapolis will be added next season). But perhaps the most obvious reason is the lack of a consistent American star.

In addition to Hayden there are three Americans currently on the circuit: John Hopkins, Kurtis Roberts and Colin Edwards, who rides on Rossi's team. Because American riders tend to come up racing on dirt, foreign sponsors rarely seek them out, preferring to recruit from the ranks of Europeans groomed on pavement. This wasn't always the case. Kenny Roberts Sr., known as "the Cowboy," won three world championships, starting in 1978, and several other Americans (most notably the former AMA champion Randy Mamola) followed him overseas, but Roberts thinks that the days of American dirt trackers switching over to Grand Prix are probably gone. "Nicky was very lucky that he got out when he got out," Roberts says. "It's really difficult to transfer to this type of racing now."

His son Kenny Jr. was the last American before Hayden to win a title. That was in 2000, a year that is especially notable because it marked the end of the pre-Rossi era. Rossi arrived the next season after winning championships in both lower classes and went on to win five straight G.P. titles, an unprecedented feat that has made him one of the world's most popular and highest-paid athletes, at an estimated \$30 million a year.

To go to a MotoGP race today is to attend a meeting of the cult of

Rossi. Vast swaths of any given crowd will be clad in canary-yellow Rossi apparel or sporting his number, 46. So pervasive is the mania that, at Le Mans, I spotted Rossi stickers affixed to laptops in that alleged bastion of objectivity, the media room. "There was one Muhammad Ali," Kenny Roberts Sr. told me with no apparent irony, "and there's only one Valentino Rossi."

Such was the scene Nicky Hayden entered in 2003, recruited by Honda (already his superbike sponsor in the United States) to join MotoGP as Rossi's teammate. Though most racers work their way up MotoGP's two lower tiers, a sort of farm league that races the same weekends on the same tracks, Hayden was sent right to the top. He had to learn new bikes and new tracks on the fly while playing second banana to a global sporting god.

"Any young American coming in, let's be honest, 90 percent of people want to see you fail," Hayden says. "That's just a reality, and nothing I did at first was ever good enough. Over time, I've got things straight."

That first season, he finished fifth overall in the series and was named rookie of the year. The next season was rougher — Hayden struggled with his bike and took eighth — but when Rossi left to ride for Yamaha in 2004, Hayden became Honda's top rider. He rewarded the team's confidence with a third-place season finish and established himself as one of the most flamboyant riders in the sport, dubbed the Kentucky Kid for his Appalachian twang and his seemingly wild racing style. (Hayden says that to this day when he pulls out his passport in European capitals, people yelp, "Kentucky Fried Chicken! Kentucky Derby!")

The 2006 season was like something out of a heartwarming Disney sports movie: the kid who grew up at the end of a dirt road in Kentucky wins the world championship in dramatic fashion, beating the most famous man ever to ride a bike. Like any feel-good story, this one had a crucial moment of truth: The Kentucky Kid had led Valentino Rossi for much of the season, but Rossi overcame his struggles to close within 8 points of Hayden by the second-to-last race of the year. That's when Hayden's teammate, a diminutive Spanish rookie named Dani Pedrosa, made a monumental blunder: he lost control and crashed into Hayden, ending his race and seemingly his chances at winning the title.

In a post-race news conference, Hayden hid behind giant sunglasses and told reporters, his voice cracking, that he felt his lifelong dream had just been snatched from him. Asked if he could forgive Pedrosa, he answered, "If it costs me the championship, it's something I could live with for the rest of my life."

Rossi went to the season finale in Valencia with his own 8-point lead. Hayden's only shot was to win and for Rossi to finish third or lower. In the view of just about everyone, Hayden included, he had almost no chance.

Hayden appeared in Spain with new graphics stashed on the back of his leathers: a hand of playing cards, a pile of poker chips and the words "All In." He said he was going to win or crash — which would have really hurt, since he had broken his collarbone in the crash with Pedrosa. As it turned out — and always does in the movies — the antagonist miscalculated. Rossi, who rarely crashes, slipped on a corner early in the race, and Hayden cruised to a third-place finish. He won the world championship by 5 points.

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"I remember Sunday night I went to my pit box before the awards ceremony, and there was the banner that said, 'Nicky Hayden, World Champion,' and I just lost it," Hayden recalls. "The idea of growing up to be a world champion, it just seemed so far away. My parents gave up a lot, and there are a lot of bumps and bruises and it hurts sometimes. So you definitely have to be prepared to suffer a bit. It's not always just a big cupcake ride." Here it is worth noting that one trait Earl Hayden surely passed on to his son is a natural gift for the colorful, sometimes confounding aw-shucks aphorism.

On a sweltering day in mid-June, nearly a month after Le Mans, I found my way to Earl's Lane, where Hayden was enjoying a rare three-day break from the grueling — six races in eight weeks — European leg of the season. In contrast to the last time I'd seen him, slumped in his trailer after the crash, he was smiling and expansive, despite spending the previous day running a relay from couch to toilet because of a bout of food poisoning caused by some bad airplane food.

"Welcome to the OWB," Hayden said, strolling out of his garage in cargo shorts and sandals. "Your first time?" Also on the scene at Earl's Lane was the crew of the MTV show, which had just accompanied Hayden to the chiropractor, where he had gotten a spine adjustment and taken a foot bath while chatting with ESPN's Dan Patrick by cellphone. If an MTV reality show can be considered a marker of stardom, then Hayden is finally on his way to becoming an American teen idol. The show, called "The Kentucky Kid," will follow a year in Hayden's life and function like the Owensboro installment of "The Real World."

At this moment, the cameras were trained on a nearby paddock where two of Earl's donkeys were getting frisky. Recently, the donkeys have multiplied, as have the miniature ponies that Earl is trying to breed into even tinier ponies, with the goal of one day owning a horse the size of a small dog. Earl says he has also "got a guy" shopping around for some giraffes — an addition that would require an electric fence, "because I'd hate for them to eat up all my dang trees." He's also in the market for a zebra-donkey hybrid known, naturally, as a zedonk. "I'm not sure we're ready for any giraffes," Nicky said.

The Hayden brothers refer to their dad as Earl the Squirrel, or just Squirrel, and the first thing Nicky did after crossing the finish line for his first MotoGP win, in Laguna Seca in 2005, was to yank the Squirrel onto the bike and take him around the track on a victory lap, an American flag fluttering cinematically behind them.

"I can't say I've had as much fun this year," Hayden told me, standing in the shade of the barn. "The bike's not working for me. I'm fighting it and I crashed, so I'm riding injured." (In addition to the torn cartilage, he broke a rib at Le Mans. He's also still nagged by his collarbone, the one he had broken in the crash with Pedrosa.) "But still my job's a dream, and I'm sure it will turn around."

A few days before heading home from Europe, Hayden finally got the new chassis he'd been wanting, as well as a new exhaust pipe. As a result, he'd had his best finishes of the season and finally returned to the podium after the ninth race in the series, in the Netherlands, moving back into the top 10 after taking third behind Rossi and the point leader, the Australian Casey Stoner, who rides for Ducati. He finished third again at the next race, in Germany, and suddenly things were looking up going into Laguna Seca, where he'd won the last two years. Laguna would also be special because Kawasaki had arranged to give Roger Lee a bike and an exemption to take part in his first-ever MotoGP race — perhaps a test drive for the next member of Earl's race team to join the circuit. Alas, disaster struck again: another rider collided with Nicky on the first lap, damaging his brakes and forcing him to drop out later in the race. (Roger Lee, on the other hand, gave the Haydens something to cheer about: he rode well and finished 10th.)

As Neil Spalding explains it, a motorcycle racer is far more important, relative to his machine, than an auto racer is to his, which makes sense when you consider how physically demanding MotoGP is. A rider

leans hard into every turn, getting so low that his 300-pound bike nearly brushes the track. As he comes out of the turn, he must yank the bike upright, all while going at top speed. When braking, he stands up, using wind resistance to help slow the bike, then drops into a crouch for full-throttle sprints. Hayden is strong and lithe and, owing to his long career on dirt bikes, very comfortable mauling his bike around.

More than ever before, the results this season have been influenced by technology. Following the rules change, Ducati showed up with a superior bike, and Stoner has dominated. The more manufacturers rely on computer controls, the more it harms the guys like Hayden and Rossi, who are regarded as the purest racers. "Futuristic things like traction control, it's cutting down the role of the talent," says Randy Mamola, the ex-racer and now a television commentator. "If you put [Stoner] on Nicky's bike, he wouldn't have won any races. I guarantee that."

"I think we finally got the bike right," Hayden told me in Kentucky. "I hope so." He was just back from a 35-mile bicycle ride with Tommy, part of a grueling workout schedule set by his trainer (a former professional cyclist who lives in Florida) and uploaded daily to his computer, where results are plotted and studied. Rose Hayden told me that the first thing her son does when he gets home from abroad is to go for a run or a bike ride and that the difference between Nicky and Tommy, who's also a fitness nut, is "Nicky might overdo it. When Tommy's body tells him that's enough, he'll quit. Where Nicky will think, 'I've got another 10 minutes in me.'"

When the Hayden boys were just starting out, they had promised their father that they would never smoke, drink alcohol or experiment with drugs. "I'm not going to put my life and savings on the line and then you go and waste it," Earl says he told them. Hayden had never tasted alcohol until after last year's final race, when the celebratory Champagne was passed around the podium. For once, he didn't just shake it up and spray it on the umbrella girls. "He said, 'Dad, what do you think?'" Earl recalls. "I said, 'It's probably O.K.'"

Accordingly, the humble Earl's Lane manor has begun to show the trappings of the Hayden brothers' success. After winning his championship, Nicky gave his younger sister, Kathleen, his Mercedes, and he told me he's thinking about giving Jenny the blue Bentley that sits in the garage if he can win another title. The compound includes a swimming pool and a tennis court, as well as the garage that houses Nicky's apartment and the fancy cars. One entire bay is filled with racks of used leathers (some of them dodgy vintage outfits once worn by Earl), a huge case of trophies and a row of motorcycles that includes the 600cc Supersport Honda on which 18-year-old Nicky won his first AMA championship, in 1999, beating Tommy by 5 points to become the youngest-ever champion in United States history. Next to it are the green Kawasakis on which Tommy won two AMA championships of his own (in 2004 and 2005) and, Nicky said, a "spot saved for Rog." He pointed to an empty space between Tommy's bikes and his own most-treasured possession: the Honda on which he won the championship.

"It's the one thing I put in my contract," Hayden said. "If I ever won I could keep it, and Honda came through." The fluids had been drained and the battery removed, but Hayden has promised his friends he'll fire it up again someday. Maybe, he joked, he'll ride the multimillion-dollar machine in the Owensboro Christmas parade, tossing out candy canes at 200 miles per hour. The only actual working motorcycle in the garage is a replica of his Grand Prix bike, which Honda sells in its showrooms. "I've only ridden it twice," Hayden said. "It's hard to do 35 on a side street. I'd get carried away — not meaning to, but I get paid to go fast."

He left the garage and headed into the hot Kentucky sun. Tommy had just arrived, and Roger Lee would be there any minute. The next morning, Nicky was to fly out early to meet his team in England, but right now it was just about time for dinner.

"It's my way to get away from the drama of MotoGP," he said of coming here to far western Kentucky, enduring a couple of flights and a good hour in a car just to have 72 hours on Earl's Lane. "I like to just come home here and kick it with my people and chill." Rossi, who lives in London, "had to leave his home country because he couldn't go out in public. At least I get to come home." ■

SPORTS ON THE EDGE

The New Daredevil

Meet the most reckless man to ride a motorcycle since Evel Knievel

By Josh Dean

ROBIE MADDISON THOUGHT he was going to die. Which shouldn't have been surprising, since death is an occupational hazard for a man who makes a living flying over football fields on a motorcycle. Maddison—known to everyone as “Maddo”—had just launched himself off a ramp on his bike in an attempt to break his own world record for motorcycle distance jumping. He needed to soar 340 feet, but the instant he left the ramp, he knew something was wrong. “I realized I wasn't gonna make it,” he says. “I thought, ‘I can't believe I'm gonna die in front of 40,000 people.’ Luckily, I missed death by two feet. But that's a pretty life-changing moment.” Then, of course, he did the jump again a half-hour later.

As of last December, no one had ever jumped farther than 277.6 feet on a motorcycle, but Maddo—a rising star in the X Games sport of freestyle motocross (FMX)—just had a feeling it was something he could do. So on New Year's Eve in Las Vegas, he broke the world record live on ESPN, flying 322 feet in front of millions of viewers.



HISTORIC FLIGHT
Robbie Maddison keeps shattering the world distance record for motorcycle jumping—it's now at 351 feet.

“There are a lot of guys who do FMX, and a few who are serious about distance jumping,” says Bryan Stealey, managing editor of *Road Racer X* magazine. “But he's in a class of his own.”

Maddo, a 27-year-old Aussie, was a champion motocross rider in his youth, but by the time he made it to America, FMX was already a growing

sports phenomenon with established homegrown stars, and he felt the need to make his mark. His solution was to smash distance records. “Maddo is insane,” says Travis Pastrana, the seven-time FMX X Games gold medalist. “He has a set of brass balls that allow that guy to fly a motorcycle farther than anyone ever dreamed.”

“It's actually so intense it's sickening,” says Maddo, who is preparing to debut some never-before-seen tricks at this summer's X Games. “The feeling in the air is terrifying. Every time I get on the bike, I'm saying goodbye to everyone in my life, because I don't know if I'm riding away from it. I know on the next jump I could die—but I just want it.”

SKATOPIA

[Cont. from 48] of alcohol. He is sipping out of a plastic SpongeBob SquarePants cup bearing the message **THIS IS THE BEST DAY EVER**. A tattered American flag hangs over a severe-looking 13-foot-deep bowl. Graffiti covers the barn's exposed wooden beams: “Eatin' Ain't Cheatin',” “Hobbits Are Gay.”

Martin bombs straight into the bowl, crouching and reckless, occasionally losing his board when attempting a wilder trick. Amber, his pretty 27-year-old girlfriend, who is studying to be an anesthesiologist, looks on affectionately. Brandon, meanwhile, though also a powerful skater, has the opposite style: He barely bends his knees as he hurtles down sheer angles, looking calm and moving with the elegance of a skier.

Money is tight. Martin settled a civil case last November stemming from a 2004 bar fight. “Dude's girlfriend was dating me, I ran into him at the bar, and he was like, ‘Come meet me in the parking lot,’” Martin says. “Well, the exact words were ‘You wrinkled old man, come get what you deserve.’ And I was dumb enough to go get what I deserved, which ended up being a \$100,000 debt to my lifestyle.” One of the guys in the fight had a bat, but Martin relieved him of that and ended up putting two men in the hospital. He spent 45 days in jail.

Martin scrapes by, though: selling merchandise (and scrap metal) and cadg-

ing donations from ex-skaters. “There's a huge loyalty in skating,” he says. “The guilt is worse than Catholic if you leave.” There's also a Skatopia documentary in the works. “That'll end up being a great résumé piece for the filmmaker,” Martin says. “Meanwhile, I'll be here picking through the embers. Scavenging copper wire out of old houses like some hobo.” Up on the hill, some teenagers are skating the Lula Bowl. The only thing visible from down here is the bowl's cement ridge. Occasionally, a black-clad figure pops to the surface of the bowl. You can't see their skateboards. The boys seem to be floating. They look like kites.

There's an odd purity to Martin's vision. As he likes to say, he's figured out a way to replace money with work and to give visitors whose only knowledge of anarchy comes from punk-rock songs a

taste of the absolute freedom they think they want. “We just like to show young kids once in a while that there's some hope for them,” he says. “That people can live a dream, and you don't have to be rich. It's hard as hell to make a living out here. But as far as freedom goes?” Martin tosses a baseball to one of the dogs. “It's retarded,” he continues. “Everyone always refers to *Field of Dreams* when they talk about Skatopia. But I've always lived this way. Former girlfriends would tell me, ‘You're just gonna be a lonely old man with all this stuff. No one's ever gonna use it.’ And I'd say, ‘Bet not.’”

Amber comes by and says she has to head home to West Virginia. Martin asks if she'd like to go up to the woods first, to admire the view. She says sure; they excuse themselves and begin to make their way up the hill.

For more exclusive photos of Skatopia and a preview of the upcoming Skatopia movie, visit rollingstone.com/issue1058

SAN DIEGO UNION-TRIBUNE

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Sunday Special



John Hopkins of Ramona has plenty of sponsors and fan support as a top rider on the MotoGP tour. Photos courtesy of John Hopkins

Call him 'Hopper'

SAN DIEGO UNION-TRIBUNE (continued)

July 3, 2005

Different name and a bit of fame accompany Ramona's John Hopkins when he races on MotoGP circuit in Europe

By Bill Center
STAFF WRITER

John Hopkins has been home this week, enjoying the serenity of Ramona ... the ability to walk around almost unnoticed.

"Were we in Europe right now, especially Spain, Italy or France, we couldn't be doing this," said his girlfriend, Desiree Crossman.

What Hopkins was doing was having breakfast and a conversation in a restaurant.

For in Southern California, John Hopkins is, well, John Hopkins. In Europe, particularly during the MotoGP season, he is "J-o-h-n HOPPER H-O-P-K-I-N-S ... Team Suzuki."

Honestly, a rock star has been in our midst all week and few recognized the man.

MotoGP is the NASCAR Nextel Cup of Europe — the two-wheel equivalent to Formula One, and then some.

And Ramona's own Hopkins is one of only 22 hand-picked motorcycle riders from around the world — one of four Americans — competing on the 17-event, road racing circuit where speeds top out at an astonishing 215 mph and crowds can top 200,000.



The dangers of racing on the MotoGP tour are obvious, with racers reaching speeds of 215 mph. John Hopkins says he's broken "20 big bones" racing motorcycles.

SAN DIEGO UNION-TRIBUNE (continued)

July 3, 2005

Normally, Hopkins sightings in his hometown are made over the winter.

But the 22-year-old made a trip home last week to visit family and friends because the MotoGP tour will be at Mazda Raceway-Laguna Seca in Monterey next weekend for the first time since 1994.

"This is an exciting time for all of us, especially the Americans, because we can show the nation what we're about," said Hopkins.

What MotoGP riders are about is the ultimate rush.

Think an IndyCar is fast at 200 mph. Watch someone rocket past on two wheels at more than 200 mph, then brake for a hairpin turn, leaning the bike to within inches of the ground to maintain control while running at arm's length from the competition.

A MotoGP race is like watching a high-speed dance of near-death experiences.

Thus far, however, it's been mostly motorcycle aficionados who have tuned into the Speed Channel to watch MotoGP races from Europe (the worldwide telecasts are said to be viewed weekly by an audience of some 300 million fans in 200 nations).

And, honestly, motorcycle racing is one sport that is best viewed in person. Television doesn't accurately capture the capabilities of these amazing riders and their state-of-the-art steeds. The acceleration, closing speeds and the riders' incredible control are best captured by the naked eye against a bigger panorama.

"It is really a rush," said Hopkins.

Sometimes, a rush to the hospital.

During his riding career — which was launched at the age of 5 in the high deserts east of his childhood home of Los Angeles — Hopkins counts "20 big bones" among the breaks of his sport. That doesn't include ribs, fingers and toes, all the small stuff that is an incidental employment hazard.

"I remember when I was 6 or 7," he said. "I was in a cast with a broken fibia and

tibia. I got the cast off the day before Christmas. For Christmas, my parents gave me a new bike, a 60cc Kawasaki. I went right out and broke my other leg in the same spots."

Hopkins' ankles, both of which he broke, again, during a fun event at Qualcomm Stadium before the 2004 Supercross, look like a road map given the scars of numerous surgeries.

Yet, he rides on ... everywhere except the American highway.

"I won't ride on the freeways," he said. "It's crazy out there on both sides. Some of the riders I've seen ... And I don't trust the people behind the wheels. So you won't see me on the highways."

To catch an electrifying glimpse of the rider known simply as "Hopper" in Europe, and his peers, rent the DVD "Faster," a film produced by Mark Neale chronicling the MotoGP tour. It's a thrill ride. Or check out Hopkins' Web site, hopperracing.com.

But if he's so big in Europe, why haven't we heard more about John Hopkins in his hometown?

"As soon as I really had my first success in the United States, I was sent to Europe," said Hopper, who believed his riding career was over when he was 15.

It was motocross that brought Hopkins to San Diego County and Ramona. His dad, a truck driver and former Isle of Man road racer, brought his family from England before Hopkins was born and moved again from Los Angeles to Ramona because he and John were spending so much time at Barona Oaks for mini-motocross events. This is when the young Hopkins was 8, mind you.

"Motocross was my passion," said Hopkins. "I won a lot of youth motocrosses and that was the direction I wanted to follow."

But at 12, he was seated on a road racing bike for the first time and went 125 mph on a

125cc bike at Willow Springs Raceway. He was a natural.

"But I still hadn't made my mind up," he said.

But at 15, three years after his father died, Hopkins had reached what he thought was a dead end. His bike was breaking and his sponsorship money had dried up.

He was stopped when John Ullrich the following year offered him a chance to ride in the three-event Aprilia Cup Challenge at Road Atlanta, Pocono (Pa.). Hopkins won all three races, despite breaking his right ankle during the practice for the final round at Pocono.

Shortly after that, Hopkins was called to Europe, where he has been riding on the MotoGP tour since he was 19.

Hopkins has yet to win a MotoGP race in 52 starts. The Italian great Valentino Rossi of Yamaha fame wins most of the races (74 and counting) plus six world championships.

Hopkins' best finish was a sixth at Portugal last year, although he put his Suzuki on the front row in Japan last year (only to get T-boned going into the first turn).

"We're still in a development stage with the bike," said Hopkins of his 1,000cc, four-stroke Suzuki.

Hopkins' all-out riding style has attracted interest from other teams. But his intention is to stay with the team that gave him his chance.

"It has been a struggle getting this bike to the competitive level of other, better-funded teams," said Hopkins, who teams with fellow American Kenny Roberts Jr.

"But we'll do it. And when we do, it is going to be so gratifying."

And just maybe John Hopkins will be recognized in his hometown.

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Math problem: Hop the Las Vegas Arc

By Sal Ruibal
USA TODAY

Robbie Maddison thinks big.

New Year's Eve he jumped his motorcycle over the length of a football field: 322 feet, 7.5 inches. In March, the 27-year-old Australian topped himself Down Under with a record-breaking 378-foot leap.

For next month's Red Bull New Year's Eve event, he's thinking higher instead of farther.

He's planning to ring in 2009 with a 120-foot jump to the top of the 96-

Action sports foot-high and 40-foot-wide Arc de Triomphe replica at the Paris Las Vegas hotel and casino.

But he's not stopping at the top. After his landing, he'll jump his mostly stock 250cc motorcycle off the Arc and freefall at least 50 feet to a curved landing ramp and — he hopes — flat ground.

Maddison might be a daredevil, but he's no dummy.

"This is doable," he says. "I've given a lot of thought to it. With the right angle and the right ramp, I can reach a stall point where I can drop onto the roof of the Arc. I can picture myself doing it."

He's testing ramps in the California desert. The structures look more like the frame for an office building than a halfpipe or dirt berm, pointing nearly vertical into the deep blue sky.

Maddison, who has broken almost every bone imaginable in a motorcycling career that began

when he was 6 years old, has studied mechanical engineering and advanced mathematics. For the big Las Vegas jump, he also hired a physicist to help with the calculations.

His main ramp is adjustable from 65 degrees to 90 degrees, and his practice sessions have been spent trying to find the perfect takeoff angle.

But the jump down might be more dangerous.

"That one is pretty crazy," he says. "The landing ramp is about 60 degrees. That's pretty steep. If I'm too fast, I'll miss the ramp and crash into the ground. If I'm too slow, I go over the handlebars."

For training, he's had foam pits and other safety devices to help him make it safely to Las Vegas. But on New Year's Eve (11 p.m.

ET, ESPN), he won't have that cushion.

"Aw, nothing ever goes to plan," he says with a chuckle. "I've broken 30 bones, all of my teeth, my hands, my shoulder, and punctured both lungs. But I have faith in myself. I'm a spiritually minded guy; I can hold my focus. I work out all the time; I know I'm strong. When I make the attempt, I'll be clear-headed and fit."

He says he won't get a big bonus for making the jump: He works for Red Bull, where death-defying stunts can be part of just another day at the office.

"They pay me an annual salary," he says. "Of course, my wife, Amy, is nervous and scared. For me, I get considerable enjoyment."



By Garth Milan, Red Bull

Tall order: Robbie Maddison poses near the training facility where he is making his practice jumps for his New Year's Eve stunt.

Hayden hopes success boosts MotoGP in USA

By Jim Hawver
USA TODAY

4826RB

The "Kentucky Kid" is growing up.

One year ago, 24-year-old Bluegrass State native Nicky Hayden claimed his first victory in the world's top motorcycle series, MotoGP, at the circuit's first race on American soil in 11 years.



Reuters

Hayden: Overall points leader.

Now, more than halfway through the 2006 season, Hayden leads the MotoGP in overall points as he tries to defend his title at Sunday's Red Bull U.S. Grand Prix in California and move closer to dethroning a racing king.

Italian Valentino Rossi, "The Doctor," has dominated the series, winning the last five overall world championships.

"I feel like a bit of an underdog," says Hayden, who through 10 of 17 races has 169 points, 26 ahead of second-place Rossi. Hayden, known in the series as "Kentucky Kid," has only one victory this season but has finished in second or third place 12 times in his



By Yves Logghe, AP

Follow the leader: Nicky Hayden, right, rounds a curve on the way to winning the June 26 Dutch TT MotoGP in Assen, Netherlands, his only victory this season.

last 14 races dating to last year.

MotoGP is popular in Europe, especially in Spain and Italy, where Hayden has quickly become a superstar. He posed in the Italian versions of *Vanity Fair* and *Sport Week* magazines and most recently on the cover of *Men's Health Italia*.

Last year, that celebrity spread to this

country, as *People* magazine named Hayden to its list of "Hottest Bachelors."

Founded in 1949, the MotoGP circuit is the oldest international motor sports series. This year, 15 countries are hosting races, including Spain, Qatar, Turkey, China, France, Italy, the Netherlands, England, Germany, the Czech Republic, Malaysia, Australia, Japan

and Portugal.

Hayden's recent success, coupled with the return of MotoGP to the USA, has him hoping international motorcycle racing will begin to grow in his home country.

"I want to see it blow up and become huge," he says.

In 2005, the 17 race weekends averaged about 120,000 spectators each. Mazda Raceway at Laguna Seca in Monterey, Calif., drew more than 153,000 fans. Among them were Michael Jordan and Brad Pitt, who after the race sought out Hayden to congratulate him on his first series victory.

"It was the best day of my life," he says, also because his brothers, Roger Lee, 23, and Tommy, 28, finished fourth and sixth, respectively, in an American Motorcyclist Association Superbike race earlier.

Hayden got his start in professional racing on the AMA Superbike circuit, an 11-race series that tours the USA, winning the 2002 championship before moving to the international scene.

The previous two years, Tommy and Roger Lee finished first and second overall in the AMA Supersport division, winning a combined 15 races in the series over that time.

All three brothers will be back this weekend at Laguna Seca, which after last year's win has been called "Hayden's House."