

Steve Leivan // Missouri Off-road Racing Icon

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Photo: Robin Nordmeyer

The word prolific comes to mind when the name Steve Leivan is mentioned with respect to the sport of off-road racing. Steve has been racing for over 30 years, has multiple regional and amateur off-road national titles, and a Six Days silver medal. He's had top five overall finishes at OMA, National Hare Scrambles, WORCS, and National Enduro events. The sheer number of achievements and list of events he's raced (and finished) is simply mind boggling. For all intents and purposes, Steve Leivan is the epitome of an off-road racer; he eats, sleeps, and lives off-road motorcycle racing. With that in mind, we sent Steve a few questions to learn more about his amazing career and what's in store for him in the future. The following are his answers.

Dirt Buzz: Steve, your career in off-road has been nothing short of extraordinary. What's your secret to off-road longevity? What keeps you throwing your leg over the bike weekend after weekend, year after year?

Steve Leivan: I crave the challenge. Riding a dirt bike isn't easy and it's not something that anyone can do. It blows me away the places you can go on a dirt bike—the things that you can see—the shit you can try to ride through. I like that the limit is only set by the guy hanging on to the bars. I like trying to do what some think isn't possible. Maybe that's trying to climb some gnarly hill or maybe that's simply trying to be better than the guys you're racing against. Maybe it sounds cliché, but I've done this for so long, and maybe it isn't the only thing I know, but it's the thing I know best, so it seems logical to me that I keep after it. I've still got some things that I want to do.

DB: You seem to be a glutton for punishment having raced (and finished) events such as the Last Man Standing and more recently the Rev Limiter Extreme Enduro in Texas. What drives you to participate in these types of extreme events?

SL: Like many, I think off-road racing has gotten watered down over time. Not to sound like an old bastard, but I still recall the days of 100+ mile Enduro events ... where very few people finished. That's just the way things were back then. Then they turned into 80 miles—with big breaks throughout the day. Then 60 miles. Then when the weather went to hell or the club had enough balls to put on an old-school event, the riders bitched and lost their minds (and that's getting worse I believe). I was so pumped when Last Man was announced. I knew some of the guys putting the race together and they told me "if you finish this thing, you should be very proud." I was like "sign me up!" I gave that race my maximum effort and that one day on my dirt bike changed me. I didn't look at the gnarly stuff the same way after that and the struggle that I went through to get to the finish, proved to me just how far I could push myself. That's what those races are about to me—trying to make the impossible, possible.

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Leivan pushing himself (and his limits) at the recent Rev Limiter Extreme Enduro. Photo: Eddie Marak.

DB: With a career that’s spanned so many years, and with so many cool experiences along the way, what are a few of your favorite memories and races?

SL: There are a ton of cool moments—way too many to wrap my head around. As far as races go, the national events that I had solid results at stick out. When WORCS did its’ East/West deal with [Bill] Gusse, there was a race in Iowa where I finished 5th overall. I ran second and third for much of the race and got passed by Ty Davis and Brian Garrahan near the end. But it was a big day for me and I felt like I belonged up there. I finished 8th overall at a couple of GNCC races some years back and I just posted those results on social media as a Thursday Throwback. There were a lot of legends that finished in front of and behind me those days. I also got a kick out of going to local races in other states and putting the hurt on the guys, when no one knew who I was. Cool races: the Marquette Michigan NEPG, Tecate Enduro in Mexico, Day 1 of the New Zealand ISDE (it rained the rest of the week). Lots of cool races but those are near the top. One other cool thing: there was a time when I had gone somewhere between

330 and 340 races without a mechanical DNF. In a cruel twist, I had an internal engine bearing fail the first year of the 350 KTM. The next week KTM issued a recall. Guess I was doing durability testing without even knowing it!

DB: In addition to racing off-road motorcycles you also help promote off-road events through MORE (Midwest Off Road Events) as well as promote the Off-Road Cup. Tell us about those events and your involvement.

SL: MORE was created by my family and some very close friends in 2011. The racing scene in Missouri was struggling at the time. There were several issues that were holding things back in my opinion and we basically wanted to try to fix it, so that led to the creation of MORE. We focus on creating fun, rideable, and “racey” tracks that are spectator friendly. We race both Saturday and Sunday and our program is set up where nearly everyone can race multiple classes and race both days. There are a couple of hours of open practice so that new riders can get their feet wet well before the race starts. We have some GP style races in the summer to change things up and help deal with the heat. There are lots of things that we try to do to make the weekend enjoyable for everyone but more than anything we are trying to grow the sport. Our first year we averaged around 115 riders per event and this year we had 278 at round one (round two is in two weeks). We are headed in a good direction.



Not only does Steve Leivan race off-road motorcycles, he also helps promote off-road events. Photo: Robin Nordmeyer.

DB: What’s interesting about the Off-road Cup is that it attempts to determine “what race series in the United States can put together the fastest, toughest, most consistent three-rider team.” Tell us more about this unique event and how the idea came about.

SL: Basically, it’s a nine-hour race for three man teams. Everyone can ride their own bike so that makes it easier for guys to do it, instead of having to share a bike. Each team represents a series of their choice so that brings everyone together for this one day. It’s pretty common to see pit crews helping multiple teams that are representing the same series. Lucas Comeaux came up with the idea and put on the first two ORCs in Louisiana and Mississippi. MORE was in its infancy at that time, but I rode on a Pro team both years and won the overall. Lucas came to us (MORE) and wanted us to take over the promotion of the event so that it could be more centrally located. We started putting it

on and the event went from 150 riders to 350 riders – so it definitely grew! It’s a unique event and a fun time for guys to work as a team.

DB: With you racing so many times per year, you seem like the ideal person to be a long-term durability product tester. Have you ever had a sponsor or industry company approach you about testing their products?

SL: Actually, I have been able to do some of that. In my opinion, companies should want their product to be the best out there. That means they need honest feedback—good and bad. Anytime I’ve been involved with testing stuff, I try to give that kind of feedback and constructive criticism. Some of the stuff I have tested has become really popular and some of it never made it to mass production. At the moment, I’ve been putting hours on some new boots from a certain brand. I’ve got a few more hours to go, but so far so good!



Steve showing pro moto form at the 2008 Millville, MN OMA National. Photo: John Gasso.

DB: We also noticed you have a feature on your website called “Steve Leivan’s Maintenance Tips for The Weekend Warrior.” What’s that all about?

SL: Pretty much it’s some tips and advice that I have learned over the years that makes racing off-road easier. Most of the time you need to experience a failure to learn from it. I figure that I’ve learned a lot by either screwing up or seeing someone else screw up. If I can make it easier for someone else, that’s what it’s all about. I always say that the easiest mistakes to learn from are someone else’s.

DB: About year ago you were nominated for the Missouri Sports Hall of Fame. That’s a pretty cool thing to have happen and you must feel honored?

SL: Yeah, that’s pretty awesome. I didn’t know about it until a few months ago. I guess you need first to be nominated and then you need three letters of recommendation. I had 13 letters and they were all from sponsors (past and present) and motorcycle industry people. I got to read them and I was pretty much blown away with what they had to say. It was very humbling to say the least. Definitely a cool thing to be nominated for.

DB: Two-stroke or four-stroke? What’s your off-road dirt cycle of choice?

SL: I’m a two stroke guy these days. When Yamaha came out with the YZ400F I had been riding a 250 two stroke for several years and my plan was to switch to a 125 the next year. I was getting bored with the same platform year after year and needed a new challenge. The YZF was announced and I immediately called Yamaha and told them I was interested in riding one. They went for it and I spent the next 13 years on YZF and WRF models. I got on a KTM in 2011 and rode 350s the first year. Then I took a spin on a two-stroke late in the year and decided that’s what I needed to be on. I like the quickness, the lighter feel, and the simplicity (for now). I also like riding them on deeply disced-up moto tracks and running the piss out of them. And the sound. I like the sound.

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DB: How about the electric bikes that are under development? Maybe you will race one of those in an off-road race in the future and be the first racer to span the gap from two-stroke to four-stroke to electric bike. What do you think?

SL: Sounds good to me. Pull some strings—let’s make this happen! Alta—you listening?



How many people can say they've been nominated for their state's sports hall of fame? Steve Leivan was nominated for the state of Missouri's Sports Hall of Fame. Photo: Mark Kariya.

DB: We have to ask, as a member of the “good team with a bad name,” (Missouri Chapter of the FAHQ Racing Family) you must have some seriously amazing stories to tell about riding with FAHQ President Jerry Bernardo. What’s your favorite JB story?

SL: My first real memory of JB was 1998-ish at an ISDE Qualifier at Loretta Lynn's. He was hosting Motoworld 2 back then and was riding one of Scott Summers bikes in the race as the story for an upcoming episode. I was friends with Scott and we were parked near each other and on close rows in the race, so I saw a lot of JB that weekend. Day two we were at a checkpoint at an old saloon and Jerry was laying on the ground, propped up against a rental car with a banana in one side of his mouth and a Red Bull in the other side—being filmed. He said “you know that big ring on a monkey's ass—yeah, I got one—and I'm gonna put another 100 miles on it just to make sure it's right!” Red Bull wasn't common yet so I assumed he was drinking some import beer, which made him act that way. I later learned it wasn't an act at all. The other time was in '05 at Last Man and he was announcing at the Joshua Tree section. It was lap two (of four) and I was stuck on the hill. He asked some spectators if they knew who I was or anything about me. He was given some misinformation so my sister took the microphone away from him (corrected his info) and guaranteed him that I was NOT tired. I heard all of it as I was pushing my bike up the hill! That was a key moment in becoming part of the FAHQ family. We've been pretty tight for a while now.

DB: It's an off weekend, no race happening (highly unlikely), what do you do to unwind?

SL: That's very rare. There is always something dirt bike related going on with me. If I'm not racing, I'm probably working on the next MORE track and getting caught up on bike prep. I have my stuff to take care of then I have a couple other guys who I take care of too. And then there are my nephews' bikes that need some attention when they are here in the summer. Last summer I spent a week at a friend's place in Boca Grande, Florida and was pretty much dirt bike free for four days. That was pretty cool, but on day five we were pounding out sand motos at Croom in 100-degree heat. I'm planning that trip again—maybe do some Tarpon fishing while I'm there.

DB: Last question: What's next for Steve Leivan? Are there races or places you want to ride that still need to be checked-off your bucket list?

SL: Yeah, I'm still checking stuff off. I got to do the Tecate Enduro last year and I want to do that race again and spend some extra time trail riding down there in Mexico. I think I've raced in 33 states now so I'd like to keep checking them off and see if I can get them all before I'm done. I know there are some FAHQ guys in New England that can help me get some of those states and I need to get to Hawaii and Alaska too. If the ISDE makes its way to America before I'm too old, I'd be down for that too. More than anything, I'm just looking forward to more sick trails—wherever they are. I need to get out to Idaho and see the Fly compound and take in some of the trails out there.



Steve Leivan still has plenty left on his bucket list. Photo: Robin Nordmeyer.

DB: Steve, thanks for doing this interview, and thanks for being such a badass inspiration for a lot of off-road racers out there. You truly walk-the-walk when it comes to off-road racing. Any last words, stories you'd like to tell, or people you want to thank?

SL: There are a lot of stories. Maybe I need a monthly column on the Dirt Buzz site! It's all happened pretty fast. I think back to some specific race or look at some results and then realize "holy shit I've been doing this a long time." I love it though and there really isn't anything different I want to be involved in. It seems like as soon as one race is over, I'm already thinking about the next one. It's what I do. There are a lot of people to thank but I won't get into one of those douche podium style thank you speeches you and I both like so much. I try to tell people thank you for helping me, pushing me, inspiring me, or presenting me with an opportunity. If you're one of those people, you know I appreciate it! Thanks for giving me the chance to do this and for helping keep off-road pure.