

First Strike

Shortly before the nursery had closed for good, I began getting back into freestyle, and I wanted to find a more stable place to cut loose on my quad and improve my skills. Uncle Phil had land in Forrestdale and after some sweet talking from me he was good enough to let me run amuck and build a new freestyle compound there.

We moved a sea container on to the land and built a tin roof lean-to for a bar area, proclaiming a second Shanti Town. This patch of backyard engineering was heaven to us. We created a massive down ramp for us to land on, with several launching ramps placed next to one another to hit; we even poured a small concrete burnout pad to thrash on. This was the Shanti Town I had dreamed of and every Friday afternoon we'd have some drinks and practice freestyle. We were out of everyone's way with only our own safety to be concerned about (or not).

There was nowhere else in Perth to do this. We couldn't legally build a jump or take a ramp into the public off road tracks. Word spread around the freestyle and motocross community and I had many people asking to come to Shanti Town to ride

I paid for it all from my own pocket with the help of a few favours from friends, but my plans were ahead of my wallet.

I decided to have a little show out there later in the year and charge people admission with the idea to funnel all the funds back into Shanti Town – like some kind of hoon's paradise, or extreme sport not-for-profit.

Planning for the first party began. One of my good mates, I can't mention his name, had a contract removing liquor that was past its use-by date from licensed venues. Hating to see such a resource wasted, I offered the expired grog a good home and filled a 40 feet-long sea container with expired cartons of Budweiser, Emu Export and Tooheys Extra Dry.

I advertised a freestyle motocross show, with a couple of burnout cars and all-you-can-drink alcohol. I planned for just friends and family to attend but I soon had a list 200 people long, all expecting a gnarly time – and I gave them one. It was like a buck's party on steroids with booze, dirty girls and all the rest. The day ran professionally with a guest list at the front gate, even a water truck to keep dust down and make sure the neighbours weren't disturbed. No one was hurt or injured (always a plus with freestyle) and it was just a good day all round. I threw great parties but made a terrible accountant – when I did the sums, I'd made exactly \$10.

The new Shanti Town allowed me to get better at freestyle and three years after my first show at Westdale, I was lucky enough to land a booking at the Motorcycle and Scooter Show at Perth Convention Centre. The organisers were reaching out for freestylers to put on some demonstrations and got in touch with my friends Brett and Lorraine at Legend Quad Services, who suggested my show. I had a new quad, an absolute animal with all the latest gear, and as one of the few quad freestylers in WA I considered myself a bit of a legend. I gave the organisers a list of stunts I could do and they were keen to have me involved.

I went to the Convention Centre to check the location before the show. I borrowed Colin's up ramp and a portable down ramp had been set up by the two-wheel freestyle guys. The show organisers said I could use my own ramp, but I figured theirs would work well enough, even though it wasn't designed for a quad. A practice session was scheduled for Thursday before the event opened to the public, but it began to rain and we had to stop part way through. I had just a brief chance to check out the ramps before the wet weather and worked on my speeds and angles. It wasn't the perfect set up for me but I could get by.

The following day, I was on my way back to the Motorcycle and Scooter Show when I saw my Uncle Eddy driving a front end loader slowly along the road. I hung out the side of my car and gave him the finger, being a silly bugger. We were always smartasses to each other. He laughed when he saw me and I told him I was off to do some freestyle stunts.

"Don't go breaking your fucking legs!" he joked.

"Shut up old man, you don't know anything!" I yelled back.

I arrived at the Convention Centre where the doors were opening for the first official day of the show. A steady stream of people arrived to look at all kinds of two wheeled vehicles and enjoy the entertainment. I ran some spanners over my quad and gave it a cursory check over, but there would be no time for practice – it was show time. I stood back as the rest of the freestyle boys did their warm up jumps before I fired up my quad and accelerated for my run into the jump. Motor revving and ramp approaching, I committed to the jump at the same time I realised I was going too fast. I had little experience jumping on concrete and the hard surface allowed me to build up speed quicker than normal. I flew through the air and sailed over the safety of the down ramp, flat landing the quad on the concrete.

As every kind of shock absorption in the suspension bottomed out, I felt my left leg snap and right ankle blow out. A mental picture of the x-rays went through my head as I came to a stop. I rode as best I could back to the pit area and the concerned looks of the other riders. “You guys better get me an ambulance quick smart,” I said.

I rested on the seat of my quad and almost fell straight off the back; the whole subframe was broken. My brother-in-law Aaron and mate Fingers were there and they said they had missed seeing the stunt, but they heard the engine revving in the sky, followed by a crack, and they knew it was bad. The paramedics arrived to administer painkillers and send me to Royal Perth Hospital (is anyone still keeping count of hospital visits?), which was fortunately only a few blocks down the road.



Getting attended to shortly after my first big crash, note the green whistle on my chest to ease the pain.

Doctors informed me I had a snapped tibia and fibula on my left hand side, while on the right side I had put the calcaneus (ankle bone) through the Achilles tendon, which made a real mess of the foot. Surgery was needed to add plates and screws to the ankle in an effort to get the bone to fuse, while my left leg received a rod from the knee to my ankle.

I steeled myself for a long stint in hospital with the memories of chemo still fresh in my mind, but I discovered the experience would be very different. I was relatively able bodied when I had cancer and the mental battle was to push through the treatment, which attacked the very way my brain operated. I could walk around outside if I wanted to feel the sunshine on my face, but sometimes the end seemed so far away.

This time my broken bones meant I couldn't run around all over the place to pass the days. But my mind was healthy and operational and now I had a waiting game as the bones healed. Boredom was the enemy, and I realised I had to work against negative thoughts which could have lead to depression. I never allowed my mind to feel like I was stuck in that bed and I told myself I was on a resort holiday where I listened to music and someone brought me food all the time. It wasn't exactly like going away to Bali but the mind trick helped.

When I had cancer, the hospital environment around me was very loving and caring. The cancer ward nurses spent a lot of time with people who had few days left to live; softly spoken and gentle, they knew the timeline for cancer meant even leaving the hospital was no guarantee of a full recovery. But as an injured stuntman the medical staff treated me differently. They'd call me a 'Temporary Australian', make jokes at my expense (and I returned the favour), and generally pushed me towards a point in time where my recovery would likely be complete.

I found ways to relieve the boredom. I made friends with all the nurses, which not only made the day go faster, but also made them more keen to make me toast and cups of Milo. I found a little bit of respect and common courtesy got me a long way in the public health system. I watched other patients get in there and have a whinge, feeling like they were owed something, but it never helped them. My positive mindset also did much to help my own physical healing. I had a couple of weeks to pass in Royal Perth Hospital before I was handed over to the Shenton Park rehabilitation facility to start some physical therapy. I had the same boredom there, though learning how to use a wheelchair entertained me – at least it was on wheels.

The fellow patients I met in Shenton Park were interesting to me, everybody had their own story and their own way of dealing with their problems. Some took it on the chin as one of life's troubles while others struggled to adapt to their new normal. One young fella in the bed next to me was very depressed about his future. He had been in a high-speed road bike accident, after stealing a motorcycle from the front of a bottle shop while under the influence of meth. He told anyone who would listen about his sad story, about how unlucky he was, and questioning why this event had befallen him. He even believed someone had knocked him off the motorcycle, and that it wasn't his fault, though that didn't appear to be the case.

We had a doctor in common, Professor Rene Zellweger. He was very helpful to my recovery and he took no prisoners; he didn't mince words with his patients. One day Zellweger tired of this kid's stories and tore strips off him, telling him how the hospital had the toxicology reports and they knew exactly what happened. He really set this kid straight, and said whinging to all the nurses about the circumstances wasn't going to do a damn thing to help his recovery. The words hit me too, and it

really dawned on me for the first time how my choices meant I owned not just the reward, but the consequences.

The highlight of Shenton Park was my new mate Clem. He was an old bloke with a broken femur who thought the world revolved around him, and he'd been in rehab for a while. He thought his long stay gave him more rights than anyone else in the hospital and I had the joy of sharing a room with him, along with two other patients. All Clem wanted was more morphine and he groaned and writhed constantly, acting like he was in pain. The nurses were well and truly on to his game though and they could tell from his biological signals that he wasn't in pain. Clem was just a nuisance.

I was granted a few hours of leave during my stay and my girlfriend took me to the shops to get some fresh air. Who should we pass in the street but my mate Clem? He was getting pushed around in his wheelchair by some old dear and was double-fisting two long neck stubbies of beer in brown paper bags. Clem was having a good old time and was blind drunk. I had a laugh and went back to Shenton Park. Later I was in my bed resting and Clem returned, now on crutches instead of a wheelchair and swaying around the room, reeking of booze. God knows where he found those crutches; I think he might have stolen them from someone. I gave him a verbal prod from my bed. "Where's your wheelchair, Clem?"

"I don't need that wheelchair anymore!" he declared with bravado, throwing the crutches away. Clem disappeared from my sight as he fell to the ground, right at the foot of my bed. The nurses heard the crash and rushed in, asking Clem where he found crutches and why he smelt of beer. He was cut off from all painkillers afterwards and it was no coincidence he checked himself out from the hospital the next day.

Things were quieter with Clem gone. I wasn't able to do much physiotherapy yet because I was still so freshly broken and the nurses suggested I could be discharged to continue my recovery at home and come into the hospital for rehabilitation as required. I wasn't strong enough to go back to work and at home the boredom seemed worse, so I bought a Toyota Hilux ute to work on. It was a little ripper of a car and my friend Scott talked me into putting a bigger motor into it, which helped pass the time as my leg healed. We put a four-litre Lexus V8 under the bonnet and made a sweet burnout machine.

Three months after I finished the motor conversion on the Hilux my legs had healed enough to go back to working with my brother-in-law Aaron. I tried to keep moving during my recovery, because I thought more blood flowing past the injury would help it heal. There are probably many human biology experts who would disagree with my theory but it seemed to work for me. I stayed active and found out how much my body could take, testing my strength more each day. When I returned to work at the demolition company I was straight on a jackhammer and pushing wheelbarrows. My leg had been broken and snapped many times but it was exceedingly strong, because the mass of bone that had fused around the multiple breaks was huge.

Aaron invited me to the pub, where I got drunk and did a massive burnout in the Hilux when I left (the owner of the pub remembers it to this day, and now sponsors my drag bike). I was in no way fit to drive home, with a few drinks under my belt and sore legs, and I fell asleep behind the wheel on a major road, crashing into a street light.

Looking back now, I was doing a lot of stupid things trying to relieve the pressure of my accident recovery and the collapse of the family business. I was very lucky not to hurt myself or

anyone else on the road that night.

Awoken by the crash, I groggily climbed out of the car to survey the damage. I'd only just started walking again and now here I was standing beside the road after a major wreck, which could have easily broken my legs again. Some passersby stopped to help, but I told them I would sort it out. Instead I walked up a nearby hill and hid out for a while in the night to consider my options. My sluggish, alcohol-affected brain realised that eventually a police car would pass and see the accident scene, or someone would report it, so I flagged down a driver who was kind enough to give me a lift to my girlfriend's house. The car was in her name so after I told her what happened we decided to go back to the wreck. We hauled the car out of the sand and just about had it ready to tow when a police car showed up, red and blue lights flashing. Needless to say, they had some pertinent questions and I had stupid answers.

"My girlfriend's car was stolen from The Gate," I said. "We were just driving home and saw it."

It wasn't my proudest moment and the cops gave me a disbelieving look. They took me to the police station where I blew over the legal blood alcohol limit.

I wasn't massively over the limit by the time of the test, so I decided to take it to court to see if I could argue my way out of it, not knowing when to give up. I had inherited Dad's disrespect for authority and I mucked the court around for as long as possible, getting the case adjourned and hoping it would all get too hard for them. My tricks were amateur at best and when I finally went to trial the judge threw the book at me. My driver's licence was suspended for two and a half years and I received a \$7000 fine. My biggest mistake was telling a lie to the police, so let this be a lesson to you: it's a terrible idea to try and play the fool with the system.

I'd had all this time off work from the broken leg and now I wouldn't be able to get to work at all. I thought Aaron was going to kill me. Continuing to tempt fate, I borrowed my sister's car and I drove to work despite losing my licence. Fortunately I got a break from my bad luck – though I'm not sure I can reduce self-inflicted events to fortune. I was landscaping at a house and my mate Tim was giving me a hand for the day. We needed to go to Bunnings to get some supplies and I was going to drive without a licence again.

“For fuck's sake, Benny, you've got someone who can drive for you,” Tim said, taking the keys. We didn't get two streets away before blue and red lights flashed behind us, with Tim driving and me in the passenger seat. It was the only time I have ever been happy to be pulled over.