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Racers aid fellow rider

☐ Motocross riders help Palmyra man who broke neck in crash

By Tracey Curry
Courier-Journal Editor

EAST PALMYRA—From his vantage point, James Henry watches with keen interest as the dirt bike gets some good air over the jump—confident that he, too, will be able to it again, some day soon.

He believes that with hard work and determination, he will be free from the confines of his wheelchair and back on the course once again. But today, the 28-year-old Palmyra man is content to watch the racers, who are spending the afternoon riding in his benefit.

More than 150 motocross riders from across the region gathered at Hogback Hill Saturday, May 21 raising funds for James, a racing brethren who was injured June 30 last year on a nearby

practice track. Organized by the Palmyra Racing Association, the five-hour open practice and barbecue garnered 5,000 for the fellow rider who broke his neck in a crash.

“We figured we have the resources to make their lives easier, so we put together a ride,” said the fund-raiser’s organizer, Don Gentle. “It just comes naturally to us. Motocross racers are always open to each other. This is just one more way to help out—it’s like a family.”

Chris Hoffmeier, of Henrietta, riding that day agrees. “We have to watch out for people in our sport,” he said. “Everyone knows that situation is out there. When something like this happens, a lot of people show how much they care.”

District riders Justin and Chad

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(Photo by Tracey Curry)

Motocross riders from around the region gathered to raise funds for James Henry, a Palmyra man injured in a crash last summer. Pictured (left to right) are: Don Gentle, James, Jaquelin, and Tara Henry.

Guilty Barging in on the canal

Moto for a cause

(From page 1)

Turner, of Williamson, and CJ Keymel, of North Rose, came out to ride and support the fund-raiser, too.

"We never met, but knew we wanted to support him," Keymel said. "If something like this happened to me, I'd want the same thing."

Motocross racing, Gentle said, is a relatively safe sport, but is not without its risks.

"Everything is there to protect you," he said, pointing out his safety gear—literally body armor nearly head to toe. "But if you hit the ground the wrong way, you still hit the wrong way—it was a freak thing."

James and his wife, 30-year-old Tara, and 9-month-old daughter, Jacquelin, are grateful for the club's ongoing support. In December, while James was still in a New Jersey rehabilitation center, club members built a wheelchair ramp at his home.

But what is so amazing to the Henry family, is the fact that James is not a member of the Palmyra Racing Association. He'd ridden the Hogback Hill course a few times, he said, but before the accident, he'd never even met Gentle.

"We heard about the accident last year at a meeting and decided it was a good idea," Gentle said. "We used donated materials to put a ramp on the house. We built it over Christmas and New Years in the frozen ground."

James and Gentle have since become close friends. "This is overwhelming," James said, "I knew the motocross community was very close. This just proved it farther."

James began riding dirt bikes 18 years ago. He recently decided to try racing competitively and won first place in his first race.

"I was hooked," the Massachusetts native said, adding that when the couple bought their home in Palmyra three years ago, part of the appeal was having the Hogback course so close.

It was while practicing at a local private motocross track last summer that the accident happened. As he took a jump, James said he knew it went wrong and it was going to be a hard landing.

"I crashed and landed on my head," he said, thankful for the help from other riders practicing that day. "I was conscious. When I hit the ground I knew I'd broken my neck. I couldn't move anything...I thought 'My wife is gonna kill me.'"

James was airlifted to Strong Memorial Hospital by Mercy Flight, and Tara was blindsided by the telephone call.

"There was never a more safe driver than James," she said recalling the moment. "He always wore his safety stuff. I never worried that much—till I got that phone call."

Tara was eight months pregnant at the time of that call.

At Strong, James underwent two surgeries—one on the back of his neck, and the second through the front of his neck. So important that he remain motionless, doctors put him in a drug-induced coma.

Tara and other family members made daily treks to the hospital. Their baby due Aug. 10, Tara began preparing herself for

the fact that James would not be with her when their first child was born.

"I thought I'd have to go through it all alone," she said.

But James' resolve proved to be made of steel. A month after being put in the coma—and just a couple of weeks before his daughter was due—he woke up. He would be there for the birth of his child after all.

But even more than that, he could move his arms.

Tara's doctors decided to induce labor and have her deliver at Strong so the couple could be together.

"I slept in his hospital room while I was in labor," she said.

When it was time, nurses Scott VanHoover and Jodi Alexander, came in off-duty, and coordinated a move for James—respirator and all—in his bed down to the maternity ward.

"They were so accommodating," Tara said. "I didn't think he could ever be there. They put his bed and my bed together. It was so amazing he could be there."

Jacquelin was born Aug. 13.

James spent a total of nine weeks in the intensive care unit and underwent surgery to his left arm. Doctors told him he'd never be taken off the ventilator—he soon proved them wrong. He was transported to the Kessler Institute in New Jersey—the same facility that treated the late actor, Christopher Reeves after his devastating fall from a horse. There for five months, James underwent intense physical therapy for three to four hours each day, and got off the ventilator.

Tara and their daughter stayed with James throughout his regimen, while her father, John, held things together at home in Palmyra.

Given too many unknowns, doctors will not commit to a prognosis. His injury is classified as a C-4, C-5 spinal cord injury, which means he has no movement or feeling from the chest down. Now undergoing outpatient therapy sessions at Strong two to three times a week, James is gaining movement in his wrist—a C-6 function.

"I'm hoping for complete recovery," he said with confidence.

Recovery of function can take up to two years, he's been told.

But for now, the Henrys take each day as it comes.

James said they plan to put the money raised at Hogback Hill toward a van. "Right now my wife has to pick me up and put me in the car as well as our 9-month-old-baby," he said.

He is also working though Medicaid to get a powered wheelchair. Without the use of his hands, James can't maneuver the manual one he currently has, and must rely on others for mobility.

"It's a lengthy, painstaking process," he said. "I'm stuck in a chair I can't move. I need someone to do it for me. I'm very independent. It's frustrating."

With the support of his employer, Mark Hoffman, owner of Airquip, a heating and air conditioning sales and installation com-



Above, members of the Palmyra Racing Association built a wheelchair access ramp at the home of James Henry, a motocross racer who was injured in a crash last summer.

(Photo provided)



At right, a rider gets some big air coming off a jump at Hogback Hill during a benefit fund-raiser for fellow rider, James Henry.

(Photo By Tracey Curry)

pany, James has been able to return to work on a limited basis. Aided by VESID, a vocational training program offered by New York State Vocational Educational Services to help handicapped people get back to work, Hoffmar has been able to procure voice command software and a special desk set up that will allow James, formerly a technician, to do administrative tasks and eventually sales bids.

James is glad to be back to work. Although his medical insurance covers the bulk of his medical expenses—which have already totaled hundreds of thousands of dollars—his share of the bills continues to

add up.

The couple said they are grateful for the support of their family, friends, and the community who continue to help see them through.

"We want to say 'thank-you,'" James said. "We appreciate every effort put in to make this happen. Every dollar adds up to pay the medical bills. This is huge."

Donations are still being accepted through the Palmyra Racing Association, C/O James Henry Fund, 100 Angean Drive, Webster, NY 14580. For more information, visit the club's Web site at www.palmyra-mx.com. □

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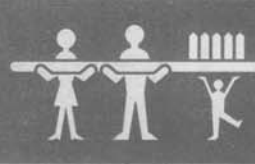
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