

Bicyclist's miraculous recovery inspiration to others

by Don Norcross

When he finished a bike race anywhere in the world - Europe, Malaysia, anywhere - Saul Raisin repeated the same post-race ritual. He'd phone his mother in Georgia and send a two-letter text.

OK.

INSPIRATION TO OTHERS - Bicyclist Saul Raisin, competing in a professional time trial in September, was told in November he could not safely return to racing. CNS Photo courtesy of Casey B. Gibson. When your chosen profession has caused a broken hip, clavicle fractures, missing teeth, the concise missive can calm a mother's fears.

On April 4, 2006, when six, seven, eight hours passed after Saul's race in France, Yvonne Raisin sensed something was terribly wrong.

"A mother knows," she says.

Finally, at 6 a.m., the director of Saul's French pro team, Credit Agricole, called. Saul had been in an accident. He had landed on his head, suffering a broken collarbone and a broken bone in his back.

"It's bad, but he's going to be OK," said Roger Legeay, relaying that a doctor said Saul should be riding again in a month.

Eighteen hours later, midnight in Georgia, the phone rang again.

"You must come now," said Legeay, fighting back tears.

"Is he going to make it?" said Yvonne, sensing the worst.

"I don't know," Legeay said. "There is no promise."

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Last month at SeaWorld in San Diego, Raisin, 25, was honored at the Competitor Magazine Endurance Sports Award dinner. He was given the Toyota Engines of Change Award for altering the perception of how people deal with brain injuries.

His professional cycling career is history, despite a phenomenal comeback effort that had Raisin back in full training before team doctors told him in November that a return to racing would be too risky. Now the cyclist has shifted his energy to helping others who have suffered brain injuries, forming the Raisin Hope foundation.

"It's one thing to be a role model for junior cyclists," says Raisin, who worked out at the Olympic Training Center in Chula Vista, Calif., in 2000 and 2001. "But it's another to be a role model for the countless people who suffer brain injuries."

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Raised in Dalton, Ga., 30 minutes from the Tennessee border, Raisin took karate and swimming lessons as a kid. He played football, baseball and soccer.

But once he began racing mountain bikes at 13, "He just stopped everything else," says Yvonne.

Adds his mother, "We didn't go on one family vacation unless that bike came along."

Raisin was named to USA Cycling's National Development Team at 16. Having switched to the road, he drew the attention of pro European teams at the 2004 Tour de Georgia when he was named the event's best young rider.

He was signed by Credit Agricole and the next year earned the King of the Mountains jersey at the Tour de l'Avenir, a race for cyclists 25 and younger that helps identify future Tour de France riders.

Raisin was scheduled to ride in the Giro d'Italia in 2006. The plan, said Legeay, was for Raisin to ride in the Tour de France by 2007.

Then came his fateful crash. Raisin cannot remember what caused his life-altering accident a mile from the finish of the first stage of the Circuit de la Sarthe in western France. Loose gravel, he guesses.

After arriving at a hospital in Angers, France, Raisin lapsed into a coma, underwent surgery to relieve swelling on his brain, then was kept in an induced coma for six days.

Doctors gave his parents two prognoses. That he'd die. And that if he lived, he'd be unable to use his body.

Raisin would beat both, but his recovery was arduous. His cognitive skills regressed to that of a 6-year-old. He had to relearn basic math and how to read. He couldn't walk, tie his shoes or clean himself.

Transferred to an Atlanta hospital after a month, he remembers being wheeled outside to a garden, seeing trees, cars, birds and being overwhelmed, begging to go back inside.

"Taking in everything at once was too much for my mind to handle," he says.

He lost his inhibitions, cursing profusely and making inappropriate comments to women. He remembers telling a friend, "If I live a normal life, I want to help people like me."

Gradually, he recovered, mentally and physically. By three months after the accident he was riding 25 hours a week on his stationary trainer at home. By six months he was pedaling 600 miles a week outdoors.

"I'm getting strong. I'm going to do this. I'm going to make it back," he told himself.

He raced at the USA Cycling Professional Individual Time Trial Championships last August in Greenville, S.C. Despite placing last, finishing the 30-kilometer course in 44 minutes, 7 seconds - 4:33 behind the winner - he considered it a success.

"For me, it was like a dream come true," he says. "The doctors didn't think I'd walk, much less ride a bike."

His dream of riding again professionally was squelched in November.

Fearful another accident might be fatal, Credit Agricole said it would honor his contract through this year but that he could no longer ride for the team.

"His heart was just broken," says Yvonne. "He just cried and cried, like somebody took a pin and popped the air out of him."

"It was bittersweet," she adds. "I know that was his dream, his passion, that he worked his whole being to be back. At the same time, it was like an elephant was lifted off our shoulders. My husband and I cried, but at the same time we were relieved."

Now, Raisin is focused on his foundation. His first Raisin Hope ride in Dalton raised \$35,000 last March. He plans to help U.S. troops returning from the Middle East with brain injuries.

In December, he married Aleeza Zabriskie, the sister of pro cyclist Dave Zabriskie. The couple met for 10

minutes at Los Angeles International Airport last February, communicated long distance the next month, then six weeks later Saul proposed.

They live in Salt Lake City.

Raisin's left hand is curled, as if clutching a handlebar. His left leg is hyperextended when he walks, the only visible signs of his accident. He rides about two hours a day, and runs or swims another hour a day.

Sounds like a future triathlete.

"I wouldn't count me out," he says.

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