

Live to risk

by Susan Estrich

Why would someone risk his life by, as the LA Times described, "extending his body away from a motorcycle and grabbing the seat as the motorcycle is upside down, then pulling back aboard as the motorcycle is righted before landing"? Or not. In which case, as it was with 24-year-old Jeremy Lusk, he ends up dead.

Why risk your life doing a flip on a motorcycle? Best I can tell, the activity has no particularly redeeming purpose, evidences no particularly useful social skill, amounts to nothing but an electronic envelope that you're trying to prove you could push further than anyone else.

Is this sport?

Why?

The short answer to why Lusk is dead might be that the wind in the stadium was not quite right, or that the money was too good not to try, or that he wasn't smart enough or scared enough to believe that risking your life doing motorcycle jumps wasn't worth whatever they were paying. According to new reports, he had been riding motorcycles since he was 3. That should be against the law, at least.

X Games General Manager Chris Stiepoek had nothing but praise for the young man who threw his life away trying and failing to hold on to a flying motorcycle. "He was really starting to emerge as one of the premier freestyle motocross riders in the world," he said. "He was a great kid and a great athlete. I think he represented his sport very well." How do you represent your sport very well by dying for nothing?

Stiepoek opined that Lusk's death in no way proved the so-called sport had somehow crossed the line. "I think there's a whole lot more that can be done with freestyle motocross, and we're going to continue to feature it strongly at the X Games," he said. Just one dead. How many more to go?

Life is full of risk. Flying small planes is risky. Climbing Mount Everest is risky. Sometimes it feels like getting on the freeway in the morning is risky. Living in Los Angeles, where the weather is fine and the earth is not so solid, is risky.

But taking a risk to achieve a greater social good is different than taking a risk because you're looking at an envelope " or a motorcycle " and wondering how far it can be pushed. Surgeons take risks every day trying to save lives, but the upside is lives saved. Climbers take risks, but the upside, I'm told, is both physical

and spiritual, measured not only by the satisfaction of discipline done and muscle built but by a soul that is never the same.

What exactly is the social good of hanging off a motorcycle flying through the air so a bunch of people who pay money to see whether you will live or die can get their money's worth? Or not.

The X Games, as far as I can tell, are an attempt to blur the line between sports and stupidity, between achievement and insanity in service of box office and ratings. Stiepoek is not about to draw the lines. Neither is the supposedly legendary (these are not my legends) Brian Deegan, leader of the Metal Mulisha team that Lusk was on. "Jeremy motivated me to be a better person; he was my best friend. The bond of this team is one that will never be broken."

Not even by a stupid and senseless death. Which may say something about the bond itself.

Would we let our beloved pets be strapped in to try what these human beings do? No, we would lock up the sponsors.

Maybe the only way to stop the insanity is to stop watching, stop going and stop patronizing the advertisers who think the way to make money is to get enough people to turn out to see if anyone will die today. Last week, one did.

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