



By Greg Williams

FULL SPEED AHEAD

Vancouver Island MX'er crashes; still has a need to go fast

Ellis Tull has always had a need for speed. At one time, competitive motocross satisfied this need.

But that changed the day Tull crashed during a practice lap at the Agassiz track in BC's lower mainland. Now a paraplegic, Tull has begun racing down mountains in a specially designed four-wheel downhill mountain bike, an intricate machine built by R-One Fourcross that uses gravity to speed its descent.

And he's good at it, too. At the recent Kokanee Crankworx event in Whistler, Tull placed second in the 4Wheelers class in the Jim Beam Air Downhill race; a run 'with about 200 jumps', as he says. He made it down in six minutes and 32 seconds. Tull also earned himself a second place position in the Volkswagen Biker X, an event where he raced head-on with other 4Wheelers.

"It's just full speed ahead for me," Tull says during a telephone interview from his home in Nanaimo. "I hope to race against able-bodied bikers, because there are only four other four-wheel bikes and riders here in Canada."

Born in 1965 and raised on Vancouver Island in Port Alberni, it would have been hard for Tull to avoid motorcycles. His father was a motorcycle mechanic in the Canadian army, and there was always a powered two-wheeler around the house. Tull got his first bike, a 1973 Honda Z50, that same year.

"I didn't even know when to shift gears," Tull says. "My dad would ride ahead of me, and he'd tell me what gear to change to by holding up one, two or three fingers."

"My dad was an exceptional rider, he could ride a bike up a tree he was so good."

"Where I lived, we were right across from a drive-in movie theatre," Tull recalls. "We'd sneak over there after school, or we'd hit the gravel pits. We could ride in them and nobody really cared."

It was a 1976 Yamaha YZ80 that helped Tull get really serious about racing. He was competitive on the track at Port Alberni, so he went a bit further from home, to towns like Nanaimo and Duncan. At his first race in Nanaimo Tull wound up with a fourth place finish. After that, Tull and his dad started doing the circuit.

"I was consistently getting better," Tull

says of his racing. In fact, he picked up a sponsorship from R&M Motocross Specialties in Vancouver in 1978, and he'd moved up to 125cc machines by 1980. He was constantly tinkering with his bikes, and had a phenomenal understanding when it came to suspension components and how to keep a bike running clean and fast. Tull raced during the summer months and played competitive hockey in the winter, right up until 1982.

"I hurt my knee," Tull says. "It was a cumulative injury from three or four years before, and it was hurting from both hockey and riding. Plus, I'd broken my collarbone a couple of times, and I was ending

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up hurt more than I was riding."

Not to mention the fact that he'd gained too many points, and if he'd continued racing he would have moved up to a level where he wouldn't have been comfortable competing. "If I'd gone to the next level, that would have been my whole life. No job, no hockey, I'd have to train every day and ride all the time."

The job Tull had was a good one. He was employed in a shipyard in a welding and machine shop, working with metal and honing his mechanical skills. He still followed the motocross world, and he'd help his friends with their bikes.

"Just little tricks, engine work and suspension," Tull says. "There wasn't a whole lot of technology in suspension but I had a good understanding of how it all worked."

"Back then, bikes weren't even close to race ready when they came out of the box. I knew how to make them perform over the bumps. I also knew how to hop up a bike – but not so far that it was unreliable. They

weren't fire-breathing dragons that flamed out after one lap."

From 1982 to 1994 Tull took his break from racing. But in '94 he picked up a second-hand Kawasaki KX250. "Once you're a racer, you're always a racer," Tull says. "I never really left, it was just time to get back into it again." He got back into racing in a big way, competing and winning.

In 1995 he met a girl at the track. Shelley needed a bit of help fixing her motorcycle, and he lent her a hand. They got to know each other, and they were married in 1999. "It's just a fantastic partnership," Tull says of his marriage. The pair raced together at tracks in the Northwest US, and they continued to race in Canada until Tull's accident in 2003.

"I was trying to do a series of jumps, and I broke them down into two triples rather than three doubles," Tull explains. "And during a practice lap I cleared the first triple by too much and hit the other jump, went over the handlebars and broke my neck, and the bike hit me real hard and broke my back."

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After rehab, Tull went to work as a service adviser in a motorcycle shop. That didn't work for Tull; he learned front-end retail wasn't for him. While it's not so easy to work on motorcycles from a wheelchair, it is easier to work on individual components such as shocks and forks. To that end, Tull took a course from Moto-Pro Suspension in the US, and realized he knew 75% of what was being taught. The other 25% "was amazing technology," he says.

Now, Tull operates Shock Therapy Suspension (stracing.ca) out of his home shop. He rebuilds and repairs shocks and forks for other motocross racers. Shelley is still competitive, and they travel to various tracks so she can race and Tull can tinker with client's bikes. His only complaint? He's busy working on suspension components during the summer months when he'd rather be out racing down a mountain in his four-wheeler.