

Back on course: Cyclist's first race since amputation is at today's El Tour

By Patrick Finley

ARIZONA DAILY STAR

David Young was seeking balance.

Two weeks ago Friday, he received the key to it. Two days after that, he tested himself, curious whether he would feel the way he used to when he was on a bicycle.

Young walked outside his home in Kenosha, Wis., pulling his bicycle behind him. He climbed onto the seat and swung his legs around the frame. He reached one arm out and leaned on his black Jeep Cherokee, afraid he might fall.

After a few moments, he pulled his arm back in and placed it on his handlebars. The balance was still there, after a lifetime's worth of trauma crammed into the past six months.

"It was," Young said, "like riding a bicycle."

In April, Young had finished first in El Tour de Phoenix, a race put on by El Tour de Tucson founder Richard DeBernardis. After finishing second a year earlier, Young, 22, had stayed at DeBernardis' home during the winter to train for the race. His racing future, though clouded by a promise to his mother to return to college, was bright.

Young will ride in the 35-mile event of today's El Tour de Tucson. It will be a far different experience from his past races. He will ride without his left leg.

A fateful motorcycle ride

Young, wearing the racing prosthesis he received two weeks ago, will try to accomplish more than just a race. It is the finish line after months of trauma, the payoff for family members and friends who have helped him along the way. But mostly, Young will try to prove something to himself.

On June 7, Young had gone out to a bar with his friends. Three of

them decided to ride their motorcycles home, with Young's girlfriend and a few friends following behind in a car.

Young said one of his friends had been drinking. Young said he had not been. He had bought his motorcycle two months earlier and shortly thereafter was lucky to swerve out of harm's way during a traffic pileup. He knew then he needed to be alert when he rode his Kawasaki Ninja.

Young and his friend were riding two abreast in the right lane of the road. Even at the time, Young thought it was a strange move.

"I remember thinking that the left lane was wide open, so why am I not in the left lane?" Young said. "But I blew it outta my mind."

Young's friend swerved into him and fell. He turned around to see what had happened. Young's bike started skidding. He's been told it went through three mailboxes, a utility pole and a stop sign, landing about 600 feet away.

"I remember thinking, 'Why am I not stopping?' " Young said.

When he skidded to a stop, Young's cycling background kicked in. As he would if he crashed during a cycling race, Young jumped up and hobbled to the side of the road.

"At first, I thought my leg wasn't there," he said. "Someone's gotta find my leg."

Young's girlfriend, a nurse, stopped and tied a tourniquet, possibly saving Young from brain damage, or even death, because of massive blood loss. When the ambulance arrived and put Young on a stretcher, he saw his foot in a sock positioned behind his left knee.

Young went to the hospital, then was flown to Milwaukee. There, doctors were forced to amputate. His mother, Teri Nelson, had to approve it.

"Hardest thing I ever had to do," she said.

Amputated above the knee

Young had six more surgeries, whittling his left leg down even further. His knee was badly damaged - doctors said it spun around in its socket at least once - so Young and his family decided to amputate above the knee.

It was a blow to someone who had grown up in cycling.

Nelson worked for Robert Ventura when her son was growing up. Ventura - who will race alongside Young today - is the father of Robbie Ventura, a former pro cyclist who raced for, among others, the U.S. Postal Service team, alongside Lance Armstrong.

The Venturas got Young hooked on cycling when he was 9 years old, hanging out at his mom's office with energy to burn. When Robbie Ventura retired from racing last year, Young trained with the Vision Quest Coaching Services squad in Lake Bluff, Ill.

When Ventura heard of the accident, he drove the hour to Milwaukee, calling others to tell them the news and collecting information.

"It really hits you, when you have to call and tell people what happened," Ventura said.

DeBernardis visited Young, sleeping in his hospital room for two nights. Friends poured in, at one point occupying his room - with a line out the door - and the entire waiting room.

Forty pounds lighter and two weeks later, Young left the hospital. He was uninsured, and estimates he has about \$250,000 in hospital costs.

Ventura, along with Young's friends - from both Kenosha and the cycling world - held a benefit dinner for him. Ventura donated numerous items signed by Armstrong. Bicycles were donated and raffled off. About 200 people attended.

Ventura estimates the dinner made \$50,000. The money was placed in a trust for Young's education, therapy and prosthetics.

"He's very, very talented," Ventura said, "Sometimes he just needs a push in the right direction, like all of us. There's a lot of things that can go back in a case like this. But I don't think that, with the support system he has, that will ever be an option."

One amazing patient

Two months to the day after his accident, Young received his prosthesis from Scheck and Siress Advanced Prosthetics, based in Oakbrook Terrace, Ill. David Krupa, Young's prosthetist there, is still amazed at his upbeat attitude.

"With his level of amputation, he is absolutely the best that I've been able to work with," Krupa said. "And we work with guys all the time that blow you away."

Young's leg is made of mostly titanium, with a hinge at the knee. The "cycling leg" he received features a carbon fiber socket with holes to allow the quad muscle to flex and an energy-responsive carbon-composite foot that attaches to his leg. Scheck and Siress sold the high-end prosthetic for half-price.

It was weird at first to not have to balance on one foot, Young said. Today, Young will try to find the balance back in his life by doing what he loves to do.

It is about more than cycling. It is about returning to normal.

"It's a huge landmark," Krupa said. "He understands that there isn't really anything to hold him back other than the barrier that's in his head. He pushes the boundaries of what you think is possible."

Young has been asked to train for the Paralympics, but first will go back to college in January. He cannot begin the next stage of his life without racing one more time.

He needs that balance.

"This is just the last phase of bringing it all back together," he said. "It signifies that my life is pretty much all back on track."

- *Contact reporter Patrick Finley at 573-4658 or pfinley@azstarnet.com.*

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