

Disposable Heroes: Freestyle motocross stars have taken their sport to new heights

By: SCOTT BAIR - Staff Writer

Brian Deegan walked across the snow toward the edge of the ramp, carefully examining the contest site.

His inspection confirmed what the Temecula resident's instincts had already told him: Something wasn't right.

The apparatus that would help launch Deegan 45 feet up and 90 feet across in the Moto X Best Trick event at the 2004 Winter X Games was a little too flat for his liking. Conditions had to be perfect for Deegan to land the Mulisha Twist, a variation of a 360-degree turn that had been landed only once in freestyle motocross history.

Six months earlier, Deegan had nailed the Mulisha Twist at the summer X Games, and the crowd at Aspen, Colo., was clamoring for an encore.

Deegan's sponsors salivated at the thought of another such performance. Anticipation reached a fever pitch.

The Moto X Best Trick prelims were moments away, and ESPN's live broadcast feed was ready to focus on freestyle motocross's brightest star.

It was too late to turn back.

"I think Brian knew he was going to get hurt," fellow FMX rider Ronnie Faisst said in Deegan's film "Disposable Hero." "At that point, he just wanted to get it over with."

"Disposable Hero" is an apt title for all freestyle motocross riders, who knowingly risk life and limb to entertain the masses.

Deegan figured a few limbs were about to be sacrificed that cold night, but he never anticipated just how close he'd come to losing everything.

He sped down the runway, launched off the ramp, lost control halfway through the 360 and plummeted to the unforgiving ground.

The impact fractured both of Deegan's wrists, snapped his femur and caused widespread internal bleeding. Deegan lost more than two pints of blood that night and was held in a local hospital for nearly a week.

It was in the hospital that a documentary camera caught the outwardly tough FMX icon in a candid mood.

"A moment like this puts you in check," Deegan said at the time. "It lets you know that this sport's not easy. The tricks we're trying now are dangerous. One little mistake can take you out of contention for a long time, or maybe even kill you." That's a risk many are willing to take for fame and fortune in freestyle motocross, an offshoot of motocross racing that experienced a boom in popularity in the late 1990s. Over the past decade, FMX has turned into a multimillion dollar industry and bona fide glory sport.

"In this sport, you're only as good as your last finish," said veteran rider Jeremy "Twitch" Stenberg. "If you win, you're a hero. If you crash and burn, you pretty much suck."

At its core, freestyle motocross is a timed competition in which riders perform tricks over a course filled with ramps and gaps of varying size. Because of a "win at all costs" mentality, basic maneuvers quickly became complex. Riders were performing back flips and body contortions while airborne just a few years into the sport's existence.

Then Deegan introduced the 360, and in 2006 Travis Pastrana pushed the envelope even farther with the double back flip ---- a maneuver thought impossible until it was accomplished at the X Games.

Risk increased exponentially with each innovation. Most

veterans have experienced an injury that borders on catastrophic, and all have scars from a sport that thrives as much on failure as success.

"That's something we all think about, and it's the biggest downfall of what we do," said 2007 X Games gold medalist Adam Jones. "You either accept it or you quit."

The excitement gained from watching a perfect run is often eclipsed by occasional crashes, most of which are nothing short of horrific. Promoters play up the danger and the damage done by mistakes, usually in a fashion that mimics cartoon violence.

Such blatant exploitation occurred at the X Games moments before Deegan's official return to competition in the summer of 2005.

ESPN previewed Deegan's return run with a replay of his nightmare crash. It may have invoked bloodlust in the crowd, but it sent chills down Deegan's spine.

"I couldn't believe they showed it right then," he said. "I just had to shut it out and focus on what I was doing."

Deegan managed to land his trick, overcome a few demons and further his reputation as a daredevil.

That's something that Deegan and many other riders have parlayed into huge financial gain.

Deegan used his image to form the Metal Mulisha, a gang of riders that play up the danger of their sport. Most are covered in tattoos, drive fancy cars and exude testosterone. Scars are not just a badge of honor for these riders ---- they help sell T-shirts and bumper stickers, too.

The Metal Mulisha hawk that daredevil image to a massive fan base that expands every year and collectively pays vast amounts for merchandise. That has produced both contests and tours of scripted stunts that fill arenas across the globe. FMX riders enjoy fame on par with rock stars among this sect of sports fan, an image that is welcomed because it sells. Sponsorships, contest winnings and merchandising deals

bring six-figure incomes to established riders and have turned icons like Deegan into millionaires.

That front, however, is only skin deep.

"Riding is not as glamorous as it seems," said new Mulisha member Todd Potter. "There's a perception that you travel all over the world and (women) just throw themselves at you. To be honest, it's not really like that. Every one of us is just a normal person trying to make a living.

"Contrary to popular belief, it's not all sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll."

Mastering freestyle motocross takes a lot of hard work. Long hours are spent perfecting tricks in backyards with foam-pit safety nets before they are ready for mass consumption. Riders practice twice a day before a major contest, learning new tricks and perfecting those recently created by the competition. Some hire gymnastics coaches and personal trainers to prepare for the insane stunts performed these days.

No matter what the regimen entails, all riders follow strict routines to maximize the possibility of leaving a contest in one piece.

"The tricks nowadays are so complicated and so difficult that you have to put in a ton of work," Potter said. "You have to stay focused all the time, or you'll turn into a has-been. I used to party and drink and all that, but I can't do that anymore. These tricks are insanely difficult, and I have to be 100-percent focused or something bad will happen."

Something bad happens to even the best riders.

Stenberg broke both of his legs during the 2006 Dew Tour and has only recently returned to championship form. His return to physical health came quicker than clearing the mental roadblock.

"That's much easier when you're younger," said Stenberg, 26. "Now that I'm married with a kid, things are a bit different. The possibility of getting hurt was in the back of my mind for a

while. But I've learned that you can't ride that way. You have to forget about the past and focus on the present. That's the only way to succeed in this sport."

That's harder for older riders like the 33-year-old Deegan. He has two young daughters and a business empire to think about these days. That has prompted a drastic mentality shift. "For a long time, all I wanted was to be the biggest badass on a motorcycle," Deegan said. "But over time, your priorities change. When I'm riding I still want to go out and best everyone else. But I also want to come home and be a dad." That has become a way of life for the modern freestyle motocross rider, an odd combination of reckless daredevil, talented athlete and flesh-and-bone human being.