



Reanimated REANIMATED

For years, Kirk Gibbs has been fighting for motocross titles. Late last year, however, a monumental crash left him fighting for his life. We track the story of this 24-year-old's remarkable recovery and the plum ride he's scored with the new-look factory KTM team.

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› In 2008, Gibbs was a privateer, but already banging bars with Dean Ferris, Luke George, Tood Waters and Kade Mosig.



t's late August, 2012. For the first time in three years, Kirk Gibbs *isn't* in title contention as the MX Nats rolls into Queensland's Coolum Pines motocross circuit for the series finale. The Serco Yamaha rider has finished runner-up in the MX2 class in 2010 and 2011, but a spate of injuries has derailed his 2012 season. Desperate to step up to the MX1 class, Gibbs wants to make a statement at Coolum; a performance that'll ensure he's on team managers' shopping lists for 2013. He cards a pair of third-place finishes in the first two sprint-format motos, and is intent on ending his season the same way he began it: with a win.

But on the opening lap of the season's final 30-minute moto – high over the notorious tabletop that's played 'host' to several major accidents – Gibbs comes together with another rider and his bike is smacked from his grasp. He lands with a sickening thud and is mown down by a couple of riders who can do nothing to avoid it. The ferocity of the impact silences the adjacent hillside of spectators, and the body language of the first riders to approach the motionless Gibbs telegraphs their grave concern for his life. His helmet, body armour and neckbrace are all in tatters, and there's blood everywhere.

The Suzuki Racesafe intensive care paramedics are on the scene in seconds. They issue a "Code 99" over officials' radios to signal 'critical injury' and the race is promptly red-flagged. Concern for Gibbs quickly permeates the pit paddock and the stunned Sunshine Coast crowd. By the time the young Queenslander has been rushed back to Racesafe's medical truck in the pits, there's hysteria from family and friends amid talk that

he's unresponsive and *still* being assisted to breathe. On everyone's minds is the unthinkable prospect they're witnessing a repeat of Andrew McFarlane's tragic death.

After what feels like an eternity, there's news that Gibbs is *finally* breathing on his own and about to be transported to hospital. The outpouring of relief is just as moving as the raw grief that precedes it. And as the ambulance makes its way from the track, attention slowly returns to the two national motocross titles that still hang in the balance. But everyone's rattled, and the rest of the day at Coolum takes on a much more sombre tone.

Six weeks later, I run into Kirk Gibbs at the Phillip Island round of the Australian Supercross Championship. He tells me his recovery is on-track, but he's heeding doctors' advice to stay off the bike for another couple of months. He explains that doors keep closing on prospective deals, and he suspects his Coolum crash might have turned him into 'damaged goods' in team managers' minds. The laid-back, quietly spoken Gibbs looks uncharacteristically agitated. He mumbles something about "maybe giving it all away...", but pulls himself up mid-sentence and quickly disappears into the crowded pit paddock.

Fast-forward a few months and Kirk Gibbs is a totally new man – a resuscitated, reanimated man! He's scored an MX1-class ride with the Motorex KTM Racing Team. The New Zealand Motocross Championship has confirmed he's back to his former self on the bike. And with a newfound mental fortitude, Gibbs has set his sights on a season he hopes will repay the enormous faith that KTM has shown in him.

REALITY CHECK

While the teenage Gibbs was making a name for himself in South Australian circles, he soon became aware that bike set-up was holding him back for national-level success. "Back around 2005 and '06, we'd just send my suspension away and get it set up for my weight," Gibbs explains. "That's the suspension I used in my race bike, no matter what sort of track. If it didn't work, I'd just have to deal with it. So when I signed on with the Zero Seven Yamaha team in '07, I'd had hardly any experience with dialling my suspension. And that's why, when I joined the Serco team in '09, I had a massive reality check. Thanks to those guys' experience, I've learned so much about getting my bike set-up right."

Gibbs quickly forged a strong relationship with the Serco Yamaha guys on and off the track, and they

worked together for four seasons. Looking back, Gibbsy realises the team set his career and his life on a very different course.

"After four seasons with Serco, there've been a lot of highs and lows, but I'll take a lot of great memories away from my time with them. Serco is a factory team with a family atmosphere, and I built strong friendships with all the guys. They took a big chance on me when I was still an inconsistent privateer, and that first year with them was a really steep learning curve for me.

"Before joining Serco, I knew I had the speed, but I wasn't a very smart rider. I was all about fast laps and race wins. If I got a win and a 15th, I'd be pretty stoked. That's no way to win a championship. The Serco team helped me think about my racing and get smart about my approach to it; to take the wins when I could, and minimise mistakes on the bad days."

NEW DIGS, NEW DUDE

Young motocrossers from South Australia often talk about a sense of isolation and the difficulty in breaking into the national race scene. So, having scored the ride with the Serco team in 2009, Gibbs realised it was time to uproot his comfortable life in South Oz and immerse himself in Queensland's super-competitive moto culture.

"In my first year with the Serco team, when I was still just 18, I moved to Queensland," he says. "It a massive step for me to take because racing had always been a family-oriented thing. Looking back, it's fair to say I was pretty spoilt. My mum would look after all my washing and cooking. All I had to do was the bare minimum maintenance on my bikes and if anything major went wrong, Dad would sort it out for me. Initially, I moved in with a ↘

mate, Brenden Harrison, and his family took me under their wing. All the same, I was really homesick for six to eight months, but I stuck at it and it definitely paid off. Living in Queensland allowed me to ride with faster riders more often, which is one of the best things you can do as a racer. To me, the only way to build confidence and speed is to consistently beat good guys on tracks they know better than you do.”

Surrounded by the right people, Gibbs also became aware that success in the Pro ranks was just as much about physical conditioning as it was about raw speed. “In Queensland, everything’s more concentrated. There are more tracks, gyms and trainers. I hooked up with a trainer called Peter Hull from

Power2Perform, who’s had a lot of success in a short time. He’ll even come out to the practice track and help me with heart rate monitoring and pit board messaging. That’s made a huge difference.”

THE ELUSIVE TITLE

It didn’t take long for Gibbs to taste success with Serco. In just his second year with Yamaha’s official Pro Lites team, Gibbs earned himself the red plate for the opening few rounds of the season. But a combination of niggling injuries and untimely crashes nudged him out of the title hunt. And in both 2010 and 2011, he finished runner-up in the MX Nats’ MX2 class. It would prove to be a motivating force.

“In 2010, I didn’t really feel like I got runner-up to PJ Larsen because I was a fair way off the points lead,” he explains. “When I came second to Matt Moss in 2011, though, I felt like I was always in the hunt. If I’d minimised a few mistakes, the title might have gone my way that year. It is what it is and you’ve got to take it on the chin, but that 2011 season definitely motivated me. I had a really good off-season coming into 2012, but then I picked up a wrist injury and didn’t ride for two weeks coming into the opening round of the MX Nats. I was really stressing for that first race, but ended up winning the Overall. And even though I ran second at the next round, I’d faded badly in the longer moto and my wrist started to hold me back more

“GIBBSY’S HELMET, BODY ARMOUR AND NECKBRACE ARE ALL IN TATTERS, AND THERE’S BLOOD EVERYWHERE.”

KIRK’S “CODE 99”



our guys had visibility of the incident, they were also aware he’d been struck by another bike. Our primary concern is always for breathing, before assessing other injuries.

But Kirk wasn’t breathing...

No. Kirk was in a clinical condition called ‘respiratory arrest’, which means we had about two minutes to perform an advanced medical intervention, or risk losing him. Our on-track team has a communications system with the Suzuki Raceseafe truck, so our trauma team was on the scene within two minutes. They continued with Kirk’s resuscitation, which involved getting a small tube into his airway and artificially breathing for him. We then transported Kirk back to the truck, where we have an additional medical team and more advanced equipment. Within about 10 minutes, Kirk began to respond positively to that advanced level of care and we were happy he was breathing on his own. Our focus remained on getting him stabilised and off to hospital as quickly as possible. We were aware he had some orthopaedic injuries, but our

main concern at that point revolved around the risk of serious head injuries and his airway.

And yet Kirk’s recovery took everyone by surprise, right?

Absolutely. In just 24 hours, the initial panic from his family and friends turned into a realisation that the outcome for Kirk would not be as bad as first thought. And that probably created a level of denial about how serious this incident was. The processes we undertake in stabilising a patient in a critical condition is very complex, and what our team did at the track proved to be incredibly beneficial to Kirk’s short- and long-term recovery. Essentially, Suzuki Raceseafe is performing the level of emergency treatment you’d get in a major hospital, but on a motocross track. After a couple of days in hospital, we set about getting Kirk in to see our surgeon, Dr Steve, and our neurologists in Brisbane, and helping Kirk manage what was likely to be a four- to six-month recovery period. Kirk was a very, very lucky guy. It was great to catch up with

him at the MX Nats series launch in February and see that he’s made a full recovery.

How draining is it for Raceseafe personnel to deal with emotion-charged situations like these?

Our guys are elite-level medical professionals who deal with distraught friends and family members on a daily basis. It’s part of the job. But I don’t think the motocross community fully understands what the Suzuki Raceseafe volunteers take on when they come to the track. Because we all get to know the riders and their families - often eating in restaurants or travelling with them during the season - our relationships are on a totally different level to patients in an ambulance or a hospital’s Emergency ward. So for our volunteers to be making decisions that will save a rider’s life is to take on a huge level of responsibility. But, in saying that, the reward is seeing guys like Kirk get back on the bike and do well. That is as close to winning a championship as the Suzuki Raceseafe team will ever come.



Gibbs has adapted quickly to the 450. He qualified well at the MX Nats opener, but injuries held him back in the 30-minute motos.



and more. That was pretty much the story of my 2012 season; it started off well and ended badly. Really badly!”

THE COOLUM CRASH

After such an up and down season, Gibbs was determined to go out with a bang at the Coolum finale. Fate, however, had other ideas...

“I can remember everything up to my Coolum crash,” Gibbsy begins to explain. “I wasn’t in contention for the title, but the day was going pretty well. I’d got a pair of thirds in the first two motos, but I was off the pace with my teammate, Luke Styke, and Josh Cachia. In the final race, I missed the jump out of the gate. I came out of the first turn about mid-pack and hit the big tabletop wide open. All I remember is seeing a yellow bike come across in front of me. It took my bike out from under me and then ... that’s all I remember. I opened my eyes and saw little

flashes in the Raceseafe truck, but the first real memory I have is when I was in the ambulance on the way to the hospital.”

Gibbs says he’s heard many stories from family, friends and even strangers about his Coolum accident, but it’s clear he’s in no rush to dwell on the incident for too long. Instead, he refers to an amusing story one of his best mates (and former team KTM rider), Brenden Harrison, tells about the day: “Brenden had his leg in plaster at the time and was on crutches,” says Gibbs. “Apparently, he happened to be standing right next to where I crashed. As he’s telling me about it, he starts mimicking how he was crutching flat-out; trying to cross the track and get to me. But that’s where the funny stuff ends.

“Todd [Waters] said he was right there, too,” Gibbs goes on to say. “He said that, after I’d gone down, I got run over by a few other riders. By

piecing together other things I’ve been told, it sounds like I wasn’t a pretty sight when they first got to me. My armour, neckbrace and helmet were all busted up. Apparently, other riders on the scene went white when they saw me. My helmet strap was blocking my airways and there was blood in the back of my throat and all through my helmet. I wasn’t breathing for three to four minutes and they had to put a defibrillator on me to get my breathing started again. Beyond that, I haven’t gone out of my way to find out any more details. I’m not sure I want to know. I just know that I’m incredibly lucky that the Raceseafe guys were only 30 metres from the crash and could get to me straight away. If they hadn’t been, you wouldn’t be speaking to me today.”

And what about the impact on his immediate family? Has the Coolum incident been the topic of dinner conversation? “Well, to tell you the

truth, I still haven't talked to my dad about the accident," Gibbs concedes. "He was one of the first people who saw me; when I wasn't in a good way. When he came into the hospital, he was visibly spooked. I've never seen him so freaked out or upset before, and once I got the all-clear, he just said, 'I've got to go. I can't stay here'. He was so shaken up by what had happened. I feel sorry that my old man had to see that, and I'm just glad my mother wasn't there."

Accidents of that magnitude are always life changing, and often career-ending. But was Gibbs ever in doubt about getting back on the bike? "After putting my family and friends through something like that, the accident did make me think about giving the sport away," he says frankly. "It's pretty obvious that the experience was a lot scarier for other people than it was for me, as I can't remember it. That said, if I didn't get a 450 ride for 2013, I think I'd be out of the sport now. That's why I just can't thank the KTM guys enough for giving me this opportunity."

THE ORANGE LIFELINE

So, with no deals on the horizon for season 2013 – in either the MX1 or MX2 class – how did the ride with the new-look factory KTM team come about? "I hadn't had the best year and I'd finished it off with a bad crash," Gibbs says. "So it's easy to understand that team managers would look straight past me; at least until I'd proved I wasn't carrying any ongoing psychological problems. So when KTM team manager, Rob Twyerould, came to me and said he thought KTM could put a solid deal together for me, I could hardly believe my ears. The KTM guys had seen my Cooloom crash and they knew about my injuries, so I'm sure they were thinking I may never come back from it. Offering me a deal was a massive gamble for KTM, and a career lifeline for me."

Despite the fact Kirk Gibbs was hardly in a strong bargaining position, KTM's offer was intended to send a message about their faith in the guy's abilities, rather than take advantage of his predicament.



"When we sat down to go through the contract and I saw the sign-on, I did a double-take," remembers Gibbs, with a laugh. "I said, 'Are you serious?!' It just blew me away. But it wasn't just the sign-on; Rob T also talked me through all the exciting plans that KTM had for the team. He explained that KTM wanted to make sure their riders were ambassadors for the brand by attending something like 36 races over the season. Rob even said I could have a few days to think it over, but I signed the contract on the spot. Now all I want to do is prove to KTM

that they made the right choice, and prove to my family and friends that choosing to continue racing was the right decision for me.

"I really want to go after a championship," he says matter-of-factly. "I'm not saying that I'm going to win this year, because experience definitely counts in the MX1 class. But I'm not going out there to run top-10, either. I'll line up believing I can win motos. I'll put my best foot forward and have a real good go at it. I think it's realistic that I can have a crack at winning a title in the next year or two."



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ADAPTING TO THE 450

Despite spending much of the 2012 pre-season showcasing his skills on a 450, Gibbs's aspirations to step up to the MX1 class were delayed another year. "I'd had discussions with the Serco guys about the possibility of stepping up to the 450 for the 2012 season. But the idea didn't sit well with Yamaha Australia's philosophy of having separate Lites and Open teams and I ended up back on the 250. I started to feel like I was getting stuck in the 250 class, so the KTM deal has let me

fulfil what I've had my heart set on for so long."

Gibbs's smooth riding style and superb throttle control is likely to stand him in good stead on the more powerful 450. But the 24-year-old also talks about the different level of respect required in the premier class. "A few years ago, I was a lot more aggressive on the track and didn't really have much respect for anyone," Gibbs explains. "When you're a young punk on the way up, you don't care. You just want to make your way to the front of the pack, no matter what. I still want to do that,

but I've got more respect for my rivals. I don't want to take anyone out unnecessarily along the way because there's no point in creating a season-long grudge that can work against you in the future."

After racing Yamahas for so many years, Gibbs's first outing on the KTM was a nerve-racking affair, but largely because he'd been off the bike altogether for four long months. "Four months is a long time," he says. "Plus I was stepping off a 250 onto a 450 and then, after many years on a Yamaha, I was riding a KTM for the first time. My first ride on the

TEAM MANAGERS' TAKES...

MICHAEL MARTY - 2009-'11 manager: "When Kirk joined the Serco team in 2009, his work ethic and speed were excellent, but his bike set-up wasn't real flash. We knew that our race bikes could bring the best out in him, and that's what happened. Kirk's a really likeable guy. He just goes about his business in a low-key way and is very easy to get along with. He moved from South Oz to Queensland for his racing and ended up living around the corner from the Serco workshop. For years, he was in here every arvo, working on his bikes and helping out. Gibbs always seemed to battle bad luck and injuries in the supercross season, but in 2010 and 2011 he ran second in the motocross championship, and I think that's what made him hungrier to go one better. He has worked very hard on his fitness and he's a very organised person. He's got superb throttle control and has always been super-fast on shiny hardpack where there's nothing to turn off. But he's struggled with starts and often had to fight his way through the pack. He rides the 450 very well and I think he should have moved up to the 450 class for 2012. It's great to see that he's got the ride with the KTM team this year. Unfortunately, he's coming into the class at a time when it's so stacked with talent."

ROB TWYEROULD - 2013 manager: "Kirk's riding style initially put him on my radar. The lines he takes and the way he uses the engine's torque are all classic Open-bike style. I've always been impressed how good his throttle control is and I knew that'd translate well to a 450. Kirk is an absolute pleasure to deal with, and the sign-on we offered him was intentionally more than he expected because we didn't want him to be under day-to-day financial pressure. There's already a big difference in the way that Kirk and his teammate, Todd Waters, like their race bikes set up. Todd muscles the bike while Kirk finessees it, so Kirk likes a much more linear power that he can roll on smoothly off the turns. The experience at the New Zealand Motocross Championship has been invaluable in getting Kirk adapted to the new bike. He started to nail holeshots and run at the front of the pack, and he's bounced back from a few decent crashes. I certainly don't see him reflecting on his Cooloom accident. If anything, it's reminded him that you've only got a small window of opportunity in the sport. He's on a new team and a new bike, and very much about creating a fresh start for himself. I keep telling him that he deserves this opportunity, and I really think he'll be a darkhorse in the MX1 class this year."



› Racing Todd Waters (#47), Cody Cooper (#3) and Billy Mackenzie (#21) in NZ was invaluable for Gibbs (#5).

“OFFERING ME A DEAL WAS A MASSIVE GAMBLE FOR KTM, AND A CAREER LIFELINE FOR ME.”

450SX-F was at Appin, which was bluegroove hardpack and really gnarly. It was super-sketchy and I wasn't very relaxed. But adapting to the different capacity and different brand is the same as adapting to anything new; you identify the things you can improve on and work extra hard on them.”

Which is exactly why the Motorex KTM Race Team has spent two months in New Zealand early this year; to iron out the bugs and help both Gibbs and his teammate, Todd Waters, get their bikes and racecraft dialled before the MX Nats opener in mid-April. “Racing the New Zealand

Motocross Championship has really helped the process of understanding the new bike and how it reacts to various mods and adjustment,” Gibbs explains. “And Todd's been giving me a bunch of little pointers to help me adapt to the 450 – stuff like hitting my marks, flowing and being more patient with the power.”

As one of the favourites to win the 2013 MX Nats title, Waters is also new to the KTM team this year and his deal was rumoured to be one of the most lucrative the Aussie MX/SX paddock has ever seen. So is there a risk that Gibbs feels like he's the team's 'second rider'? “No. I don't

feel like I'm in Todd's shadow at all,” he says. “Todd's proven himself and he deserves the big bucks he's on. Remember, Todd carried the red plate in the 450 class a few years back when he was just 18 or 19, so I can definitely learn from him. And Todd's looking past Australia; he wants to get to the World Championship in Europe. We've discussed the season ahead at some length. Both of us will be stoked to see the other guy do well; not be down on him for beating you at a particular round. We're good mates and we're going to help each other fulfil our potential for KTM.”

FROM HIS TEAMMATES...

SHANE METCALFE

- Former teammate:

“Kirk's a humble, genuine guy who grew up in a quiet country town in South Australia and appreciates everything he's given. It's a big step from the low-key scene in SA to the MX Nats, and Kirk struggled to make that transition in the early days. We both rode on the Zero Seven Yamaha team in 2007, but I've known him since he was a little kid. Kirk was always fast, but he used to crash a lot. On sand or really bumpy tracks, the guy is something special. And he's now one of the best hardpack riders in the country. In my opinion, if you can ride sand, you can ride any surface - whereas it doesn't work the other way around. It was only when Kirk started believing in himself that he began winning motos and contending for national titles. It's great to see how he's achieved success through sheer hard work and has now scored a ride on the factory KTM 450. I think his riding style will really suit the bigger bike.”



TODD WATERS

- 2013 teammate:

“I've raced with Gibbs since the Under 19s, though we haven't hung out much together. Now we're teammates, we've gotten to know each other and we get on really well. In fact, we spent every day together for two months, living out of a suitcase and racing in NZ. Sure, we push each other on and off the bike, but we help each other out at the practice track, too. We established up-front that neither of us would get the sooks if the other guy's faster at a practice track or race. We'd shake the better guy's hand on the day and move on. Kirk's a smooth rider who's adapted to the 450 well. He runs a less aggressive motor than I do and because he rides more over the back of the bike than me, his fork set-up is a bit different, too. Gibbs trains hard, but he makes sure he gets his downtime to relax. Last year, Cody Cooper was my Suzuki teammate and he's about as chilled as they come. But I reckon Gibbs might have Coops covered.”



MORE ONLINE...

For race footage and an interview with Kirk Gibbs after the opening round of the 2013 Monster Energy MX Nationals, check out www.transmoto.com.au

