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SOCAL'S
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OF THE MONTH:
CHRIS SCHAUBLE

**LANCE
ARMSTRONG**

A DATE FOR 8

Comeback: In His Own Words

You have just returned from the ITU World Duathlon Championships in Italy and are in the absolute best shape of your life. The next thing you know, in the middle of a recovery ride after returning home, a truck hits you from behind and your whole world is turned upside-down.

This is the Story of Kevin Gillotti.

The Beginning

I got into multisports on a bet at the University of Iowa, in college. A good buddy of mine bet me to do one—Tim DeBoom actually ended up winning that day's race—and I did it on a mountain bike with a Camelbak. This is going back almost 18 years; I realized that day I loved it. I was hooked. Eventually it allowed me to move out here to California 15 years ago purely to race. I had been reading all the magazines and it always mentioned Solana Beach and Cardiff, and I moved out here, never having been here before in my life and didn't know anybody, put everything in a U-Haul, drove out and now I own a home and a business and I've been racing out here for 15, 16 years.

The Injury

I had just returned home from the 2001 Duathlon World Championships in Italy. I got on the bike the next day at noon, going for an easy spin up Del Mar Heights Road, and I never made it home. I was hit from behind by a very large moving van, which threw me about 65 feet or so, broke my back in two places, broke my left arm, broke my left leg and left me in a hospital for three weeks and in ICU for two full weeks, which is pretty rare. The van came from lane three over into the bike lane and crushed me. Broke my bike into three different pieces—a carbon-fiber bike.

I hope nobody ever has to go through this, not just the pain and suffering, but the legal battles that ensued; because there's a lot of finger pointing. Of course they said I came out of the bike lane. We had experts that could diagram the height of the bike, the location of the bike, the location of my injuries, the skid marks and demonstrate exactly what happened—and they had their experts, too.

He probably wasn't paying attention and I did not even know it was coming. I woke up on the ground screaming and crying, and I remember the first thing I said was: "Why did you hit me?" I couldn't tell you what he said, I have no idea. I just kind of blanked in and out and the next thing I remember was the paramedic saying to me, "You know, you don't think this but you're pretty lucky because we normally pick guys like you up with a shovel."

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After my accident in 2001, I had to take 2002 off and I started racing slowly again in 2003.

- In 2005 I qualified for and raced both the long-course (Italy) and short-course (Australia) Duathlon World Championships. I was the 8th American and 13th overall.

- In 2006 I out-ran Lance Armstrong in the NYC marathon by a mere 30 seconds. I saw him (and heard the crowd) in the jumbo TV as we turned into the park and I dug deep.

- In 2008 I won the Xterra West Coast Nationals in duathlon in Temecula—that was a win I wanted bad.

- And this year, I won the 21K Big Baz trail race up in the OC hills (3,470 feet of altitude), followed by a second place overall at the 30K Bandit trail race (over 3,000 feet altitude).

On the local scene, I have won almost all of the local duathlons, some several times, including the Spring Sprint, Solana Beach, Imperial Beach and Encinitas Duathlon.



I was pretty twisted coming into the ER, screaming, yelling, because I was in pretty bad shape. And they were so concerned with the immediate injuries they could see—a broken arm, a broken leg, I had a hematoma about the size of a football on my left leg—that's where I actually took the blow from the truck and that's why I needed blood transfusions. So they overlooked my fractured back and weren't even aware of it until about two weeks into it. I was complaining about my back hurting and they said, "Yeah, you were shaken around like a ragdoll, thrown 65 feet, what do you expect?" Little did we know there were two fractures in my back compromising my spinal cord.

We asked the hospital how could this happen, and essentially their explanation was that when traumas come in they look for those things that are life-threatening and immediate. But let me tell you, I had more cat scans and MRIs and X-rays in a matter of two weeks than most people have in a lifetime. I mean I was going in and out, almost around the clock, so, I really don't have a great answer as to how they missed it. But they did. And when we started getting into the back issue and what they found, everybody was pretty stunned.

It was very high up, so the vertebrae are very small up there and they don't carry as much of

me out. Soup cans.

My doctor was one of the best. He wrote the textbooks and everything—this guy's the man. And the moment he put that X-ray up on the wall—this just made my heart stop—he looked at it, he looked at his associate, looked at that X-ray again and looked at me. And said: "I don't know how you're walking around, and I don't know how you're in as little pain as you are, though you think it's little pain, because most people that we see like this aren't moving." And he said, "The top half of your spine is not connected to the bottom half of your spine right now."

Their solution was: "You need surgery and you need it three weeks ago. And that means we're going to go through your back and put titanium rods in, then we're going to flip you over, we're going to pop your lung rib, take out a couple of your ribs and we're going to fuse you from the front... and there's a chance you may die while we do it."

So that's what I was left with. And in the end I decided not to have the surgery, play it by ear and see what happens. And that's the amazing thing, because what ended up happening was my body self-fused those vertebrae. In the first series of X-rays, you could clearly see the break, you could see the damage to the

"No." And I said, "I'm coming from long course World Championships; and I was the seventh fastest American overall" and I just kind of kept walking.

Now I'm PRing it, I'm winning and I'm turning over faster times since that accident than before that accident.

"Miracle" sounds trite at times, but I found God and I believe it was a miracle. I don't think this happened out of luck and it was the best thing that ever happened to me. I'm fortunate that I don't have a lot of pain. I have discomfort here and there—I have discomfort if I sit too long or stand too long, but I can tell you this, it's nothing you will ever hear me complain about because it's nothing compared to what it could have been. So to me it's an absolute non-issue.

Today, I was racing and I slipped and fell during the transition. Coming into T2 I took a tight turn and fell to the pavement, holding the bike, trying to get to my rack. Before the accident, I would have been up in somebody's grill—the race directors probably—about that happening. Somehow it wouldn't have been my fault. I was a lot more high-strung before the accident, I was a lot more willing to go toe-to-toe about stuff that just really didn't matter. And now I'm willing to listen a bit more and I'm willing to think a bit more before I speak.

"I lost 100 percent muscle mass. My broken arm, up by the bicep, was thinner than my wrist. I was curling soup cans in my kitchen as physical rehab when I first got home and that would tire me out. **Soup cans.**"

a load as your lower lumbar. I just don't think they were looking there because my arms worked, my legs worked, I had no lack of sensation or anything like that, it was just back pain because I was so immobilized for so long.

When I realized the true severity of what was really going on, that's when everything spiraled out of control for me. Because it went from: "You're going to be okay, because you're an athlete, you bounced, you didn't break," to: "You are never going to run again. Never going to ride again. And there's a great potential that your life will be full of pain."

It wasn't until I really started to move again that I started having a jolting pain down my legs. I remember telling my dad, "If this lasts any more than two seconds, I'd rather be dead."

I lost 100 percent muscle mass and 30 pounds. I have photos where my broken arm, up by the bicep, is thinner than my wrist. I was curling soup cans in my kitchen as physical rehab when I first got home and that would tire

vertebrae, you could see the damage to the spinous processes, you could see the compression fractures, etc. And you could see a little bone spur growth from T-12 up T-11. And then a couple months later, you could see a little more. And a couple months later you could see a little more. And months after that, my body had self-fused and grown bone up to that T-11, and now essentially from my understanding I now have one massive vertebrae. It's like T-11/12.

A couple of blood transfusions later, and a year of rehab, and here I am today.

The Comeback

Once I was on an airplane, walking through first class, I looked over and there was my doctor. I turned to him and said, "Do you remember me?" He says, "Kevin, of course. Kevin Gillotti." He probably remembered me because I was the only guy who ever asked questions and didn't take the advice he wanted. I said, "You know where I'm coming from?" He said,

When you lay in a hospital bed on the verge of... you know I had to have two blood transfusions, they said if I didn't I'd die. When you're looking at that, you can spend a lot of time thinking about what you put out into the world, what you get back from the world, how you treat others, what really matters and what's important. My word now is perspective. I just put a lot of perspective into my life and think about what's truly important and what really matters. A lot of the stuff we think that matters every single day doesn't really mean jack. Unfortunately, it took me an incident like that for me to finally open my eyes and realize kind of the path that I was going down as a person. And that's why I say ultimately it was probably the best thing that ever could have happened to me. Ever. I'm grateful for it. ■

For the full interview with Kevin Gillotti, go to competitorradio.com