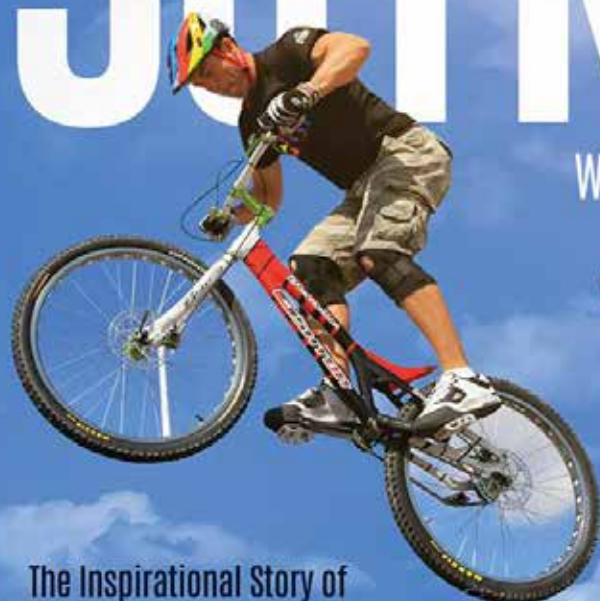


"Martyn faced this adversity with unwavering courage reminding us all that even in our darkest moments, there is strength to be found within." **Danny MacAskill**

JOYRIDE

When life turns upside down
ride on...

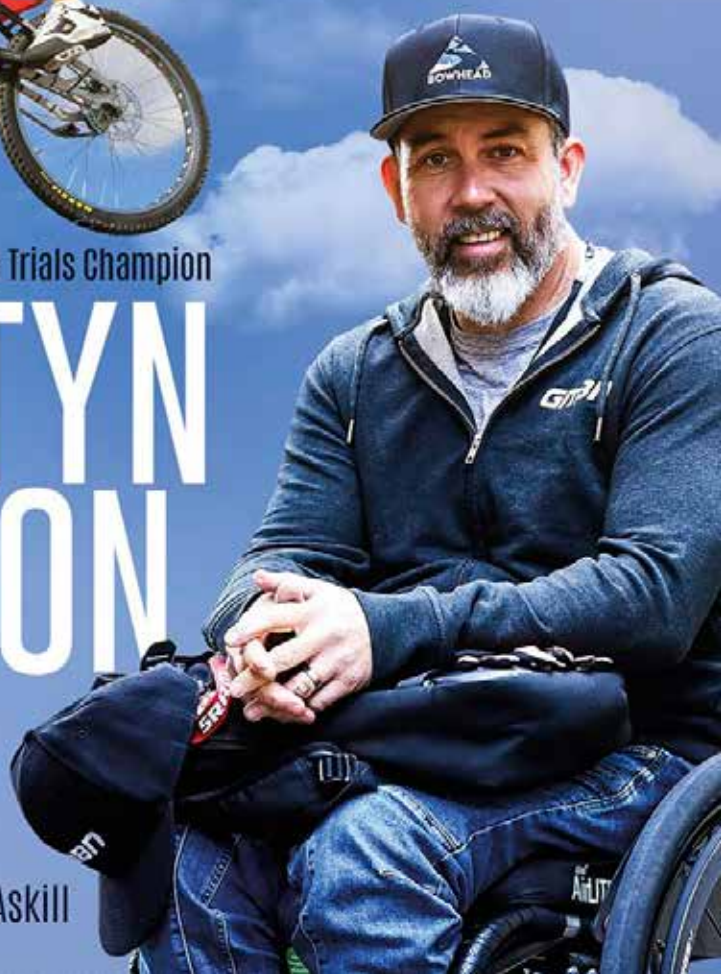


The Inspirational Story of
Former World Mountain Bike Trials Champion

MARTYN ASHTON

By
Lauren Davies

Foreword by Danny MacAskill



JOYRIDE

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ride on...

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Chapter One

‘I promise it will be fine ...’

MARTYN – Three seconds, one ... two ... three ... I have noted the pain, I’ve understood the injury in its basic form and I’ve become aware of an astonishing stillness in my mind. I’ve almost immediately moved on from pain and discomfort. I can still feel it, but I’ve moved away from it. It doesn’t have my attention as you’d expect; it isn’t the main experience. I’m now just lying on my back looking directly up at a blue sky. It’s a beautiful blue sky, some clouds here and there and you can see by how they move that there’s also a firm wind. There is still the noise of the show; my friends and the audience reacting to what has just happened. I can understand all of their concern and the care they are taking around me. However, the level of panic within me subsides very quickly.

On that day in 2013, as paramedics slowly worked around me, cut off my clothes, put needles in me and strapped my body carefully to a spinal board, all the secondary stuff within me was there. The entire time – pain, stress, panic, thoughts

about how, what, when? They were all there, but all very much secondary and being watched by me, rather than me being pushed and pulled by them. Like when you watch a big fire on bonfire night. The fire is hot, you feel its heat. It's dangerous, you can sense the danger. It's damaging, you can see the damage taking effect on what is burning. The flames are chaos, but you find it fascinating. You stay as close as you can so you can experience the fire and all its force, but not so close that you catch fire – and at any time you can turn your back. That is how I felt. Isn't that a weird thing to take from such a moment? At such a dramatic, climactic and life-changing moment; one seemingly full of despair, fear, trauma and confusion. Not only for me, but everyone around me, including my son. At that very moment I was also experiencing a clarity and control within me that I'm sure is the very thing we are all chasing when we think – *What is life really all about?*

I've been hunting down the understanding and keys to that ever since. In the time since, I had a movement away from that clarity, back to normal. I think it was initially interrupted by all the drugs that I had in the ensuing days. After about half an hour I was on gas and air. Three hours later I was on much stronger morphine, etc. So, I think I lost clarity through that process. There was definitely a moment when I was in the MRI scanner and I felt the same level of calm and a similar experience. I remember getting an awful lot of confidence from experiencing it again at that time. It can happen more than once. That was a good feeling.

'I promise it will be fine ...'

There is a lot of strength in facing the worst thing you can imagine in your own life, then realising you can take it. That line of thought empowered me all the time.

A letter written by Martyn to himself:

Dear MRI Martyn,

You are right, you can handle it. It is going to be fine. I promise it will be fine.

x Mart

.....

On 1 September 2013, former world expert mountain bike trials champion, Martyn Ashton, fell while performing a stunt he had performed many hundreds of times before as part of his Action Sports Tour. A misjudged landing and a slip of the foot sent him tumbling from the roof of a van. He hit an obstacle on the way down at high velocity and high impact, before landing head first on the ground, immediately breaking his spine. His son, Alfie who was just thirteen at the time, was watching the show. On that fateful day in September 2013, Martyn had felt so proud and uplifted, as if he were exactly where he was meant to be at that point in time. Martyn was at the top of his game. He was doing what he loved, with his son and his teammates by his side.

.....

MARTYN – This event had a few stand-out elements to it. To begin with, I had my son there with me for the weekend.

The event was a round of the MotoGP series at Silverstone race track. Huge crowds and a motorcycle series that myself and my son Alfie followed, so I'd brought him along to be part of the crew. He was having a great time riding his bike on the show equipment between shows and I think there were a number of times that I kind of pinched myself over that weekend. It was amazing to see Alfie as part of the gang. It filled me with joy and I could easily see the future of the team and how I could help Alfie be a part of it all.

The other thing that was really strange and not something I've ever mentioned to anyone at all, is that just moments before my accident, two or three minutes before, I had a weird thought. It was during a moment in the choreography of the show where other riders were centre stage and I was waiting for my next moment to ride. I looked at the large enthusiastic crowd watching the show, the other riders, the sunny weather, Alfie looking on from the team tent. I was part of something I was really proud of, something exciting. I loved it and then this thought came to me – *If I ever chose a show to end with, it would be just like this one. It's great...*

From time to time, I had privately thought about what would be my final show. Things like when and where that would happen and how I would make the decision on when to do that, to stop riding. At 39 it was natural to think about when to stop I think, but I loved riding and being part of this team. It was never going to be an easy decision to make and I was in no hurry.

'I promise it will be fine ...'

My moment to ride in this part of the show arrived and I got on with it. The next stunt was the one where I fell awkwardly and broke my back, paralysing myself from the waist down.

When I had the fall, I landed head first, the majority of the impact on my lower neck and shoulders. The crash stopped my body so quickly that my legs whipped around towards my face with a lot of momentum. The resulting bending motion in the middle of my body basically dislocated and fractured my spine.

.....
Martyn's friend, Robin Kitchin, a photographer/filmmaker and former professional downhill mountain biker was the manager of the Action Sports Tour. This was a fact that weighed heavily on him after the event.
.....

ROBIN KITCHIN – Martyn and I met officially through our sponsor Animal when I was asked if I was interested in helping out with the logistics of moving and setting up Martyn's trials show. I had stopped racing and he seemed like a fun guy so I said, 'Why not?'

For around ten years, Martyn and I spent half of our lives together as we developed the bike show he had created and took it on the road to blow minds at events all over the world. Then, in amongst this, we worked on numerous photo and video projects of which the *Road Bike Party* series found great success. Martyn didn't ever really need

pushing, though – like for anyone – a spot of reassurance never went amiss.

Having banged my head numerous times as a cyclist I remember very little of the past, however, I think from the off it was clear that Martyn and I made a good team!

.....
Robin witnessed the crash.
.....

ROBIN – The day of the accident was obviously a very traumatic day and one it will always be hard to talk about ... but made easier by Martyn’s philosophical outlook that things ‘could have been worse’.

We were performing at the Silverstone MotoGP, probably Martyn’s fave event, in front of 2,000 cheering fans, when one of his regular stunts, in which he was normally able to step back off the bike if his speed was slow, did not play out as usual. This time he was so close to completing the move that when he went to step off, he was in a weird position meaning he could no longer reach the platform with his foot, the bike flipped him and started his rotation. The platform he hit on his back added to the spin and Martyn fell to the floor 3m below, landing on his head. I jumped down from the platform and Martyn’s first words were, ‘I can’t feel my legs’ and then, ‘Can Alfie see me? If so, give him a thumbs up.’

The next bit is a blur, but certainly within a very short time the medical staff at Silverstone flew Martyn off to

hospital to be evaluated and I called Martyn's wife Lisa to let her know what had happened. We packed the show away with help from Alfie, then set off for the hospital to meet her and learn the devastating news.

For me, it was obviously important to understand how he felt about the circumstances. I was manager of the show and responsible for the design and production of the equipment the accident happened on. It is not something that we talk about anymore though, as we opened ourselves up and then closed the door on that chapter.

.....
Martyn's show team had grown to be his second family. The other members were professional BMX rider and 2020 Olympic team member James Jones, along with Martyn's close friend and team-mate, professional dirt jump and slope style rider, Blake Samson. Blake first met Martyn in 2007, having moved to the UK from Zimbabwe six years previously.
.....

BLAKE SAMSON – The first time I ever met him, he was doing his bike shows. He came to the Isle of Wight where I still live. I think it was the White Air Festival, an extreme air festival – windsurf, kitesurf, BMX. I watched the show with my brother and I got my wallet signed by him. I was 17, I think, maybe 18.

Then a few years down the line, I got hooked to dirt jumping and slope style. I wanted to pursue that as a career. I

got a phone call from Robin Kitchin saying, 'We are looking for a rider, could you come on the show and see if you are good enough?' It turned out I was good and it kind of kicked off from there. I got paid to have fun, so being young and getting paid to have fun, any sort of money, you know ...?

.....

Blake's voice still echoes with raw emotion when he talks about the day of the accident. He remains so close to Martyn, it is clear that the event and its aftermath affected him deeply. Blake is both protective and proud of his friend. He has been a real support to Martyn, both emotionally and physically during his recovery. Listening to Martyn's fellow riders, I do wonder whether there is a certain amount of 'there but for the grace of God go I' in their thinking. After all, they are acutely aware of the dangerous nature of their careers.

Blake recalls how, having just performed, he witnessed Martyn's accident at close quarters. The weather conditions during the day had been challenging. The moments that followed are forever imprinted on his memory.

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BLAKE – It was day two at Silverstone, I'm thinking. It was an overcast day, sunny spots, a bit windy. We were talking about it. There was a bit of a head-on wind for Martyn, which would be an issue to get onto his van where he had the accident, but the wind was changing throughout the day. There was a head wind for the jump riders, myself and the

'I promise it will be fine ...'

BMX-er, James Jones. He and I were like, 'it's a bit windy, a bit of side wind, a bit uncomfortable', but we were having great shows. There were a lot of people around. It was a packed show and it was quite competitive.

We did our stunts and then we came back and we were cheering on Martyn. There was a head wind and it wasn't that bad, but it was there. He just got up onto the van and misplaced his foot, slipped and fell off. It's maybe 8ft [high] and the bars were 3ft on top of that, plus the roof rack.

He was on the floor. Robin, I don't know what his words were, but I knew it was not good. The way he fell off. I didn't see him on the floor, but his son was looking. He was in direct eye contact, as well as my wife Jenna. She saw and he saw the impact. We didn't know and Robin was like, 'Carry on, carry on, not too much attention on Martyn on the floor', because he wasn't moving.

.....
Blake and James Jones brought the show to a close as swiftly as they could without creating panic.
.....

BLAKE – We did our final tricks, end of the show, with a smile like I guess Martyn would want for sure, not to let the show stop. That was his main thing. He's like that. He was always someone who would ride even if it was raining. If someone was watching, he was like, 'I'm going to ride because someone's watching.' So, yes we finished the show and went to him and he told me, 'Can you look after Alfie?'

Martyn got carted off and I took Alfie and just held his hand and spoke to him. We went to the emergency centre on site. Then Martyn got airlifted off and I had Alfie with me. Inside, in my head I knew he had done something bad, but I didn't want to know he had done something bad. I was just praying nothing would be *that* bad. You just hope and hope, but then it was terrible.

.....
Champion professional downhill rider and a large personality in the sport, Rob Warner, has been an integral part of the mountain biking scene alongside Martyn since the sport's infancy. Rob was not at this particular show, but as a bike rider and close friend, he still dwells on the circumstances leading up to the accident.
.....

ROB – He was so comfortable on that rig, but on the other hand, it was all set up different that day, he set it up left hand, not right hand and it was windy. It was probably just one of those things and the way he fell, he caught his feet on a bar and landed on his shoulders and his body bent back over him and that was it. It was just one of those things. I would say he was riding as well as he'd ever been riding. Maybe it was the mundaneness of repeating the same thing over and over at a show and he got too comfortable, I don't know ...
When you're doing the most dangerous thing, you're up for it. Everything is telling you to survive. But in other moments your guard can be a bit down.

'I promise it will be fine ...'

.....
In the immediate aftermath of the accident, Martyn recounts how he was lucid enough to simply be thankful for the fact that he was still alive and would see Lisa and Alfie again. The fact he was not dead became the focus for his positivity.
.....

CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY REPORT:

He is a professional rider and was performing a show at Silverstone. He remained conscious throughout and was aware straight away about what he had done. He talked about feeling relieved that it wasn't more serious, as he was aware that he could move his hands. He appeared to have considerable self-control at the time of the accident. He was able to ensure that his son, who was watching, was OK before being taken to the hospital in the ambulance. So, Martyn appeared to have a good understanding of the situation.

Dr Sally Kaiser, Clinical Psychologist

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While Martyn's loved ones clung to the faint hope that the outcome would not be as drastic as they feared, the realisation that his life was about to change occurred very quickly for Martyn. He was able to move on from thoughts of his drastic physical injury to a heightened awareness of his own mental state. As his friends, team-mates and

paramedics rushed to help and stabilise him, Martyn lay still amid the chaos and panic, experiencing a remarkable calmness he now associates with the intensity of a life-changing event.

.....

MARTYN – Immediately after the crash, lying there on the grass, I knew that I was paralysed. If I analyse the moments after the accident, it would go something like this: firstly, unbelievable pain, burning pain around my lower chest and ribs. That pain would not subside for the next hour or so, but after the initial few seconds following the crash, I was more taken by my thoughts and my mental state. The pain was there, but it wasn't the most important thing or the biggest effect from the crash. Like I said, I instantly knew my spine was affected. I had no feeling at all below the ring of pain at my ribs. All this physical information was nearly immediate, but all secondary to what I felt was happening in my mind.

I remember that moment immediately after the crash. Well, I 'feel' it more than remember. Because it was an extraordinary moment in my life. I knew exactly what had happened to my body, how it was damaged, but I had a remarkable clarity in that moment. You just wouldn't expect to be present during that kind of experience. Ever since the accident I've been hopeful I'd feel that kind of focus again. It caused a disruption. In that moment my thoughts, my energy, my focus were changed in a very profound way. I've wanted to rediscover that and understand it ever since.

.....

Martyn truly believes the force of a life-changing event, whatever that may be, has the power to strip everything back. Whether good or bad, such a moment can focus the mind on the core of one's existence. This seems to be a powerful key to his recovery. When the layers of everyday worries and stresses are peeled back by the force of a major event, the fundamentals of life are allowed to shine through. The simple fact we are alive and that we can still breathe, love and live is enough. The fact that Martyn could still move his arms was a positive for him. To Martyn, this realisation brought a sense of peace he had not previously experienced.

In all our lives there will be key moments that stand out as turning points. By the time we leave childhood, we have all lived through events that challenge us and potentially change the course of our lives. Every day we make decisions and experience things that can have positive or negative consequences. A new job, a relationship, a birth, a death, or an accident; often these events will not be completely within our control. They may be a genuine *force majeure*. When these moments occur, they can hit our life with the force of a hurricane, stopping us in our tracks, side-swiping us in a different direction, or spiralling us out of control. They can cause the 'glitch in the matrix' or, as Martyn describes it, 'a disruption'. They can mark a fork in the road or, in some cases, the end of the road.

However, such moments can actually impact as a break from the chaos of the mind. The loss of control can be the very thing to bring everything into focus. We are suddenly hit with the stark realisation that so many of the things we planned for or worried about are not within our control. We realise that life is a journey and, as much as we would like to be, we are not entirely in charge of either the route, or the destination. This realisation, while often coming as a shock, can also be the moment one experiences the overwhelming sense of calm Martyn has described. All the little things that clouded our thoughts day-to-day are no longer the focus, either because we are unable to deal with them at that moment in time, or because we realise they do not actually matter when life hits that fork in the road. This is not to say they won't be important again, but for a while, they no longer exist.

.....

MARTYN – The worry, stress, fear, doubt – all that stuff was as real as it can be, and I knew this situation was really bad, but beneath it all I was having thoughts (more a vibe than thoughts if I'm honest) of – *Is this it, is this what fear, worry and stress really are?*

.....

I feel it is important here to repeat the words with which I opened this book.

.....

MARTYN – I was in pain, I was worried and I was scared, but all those things sat below a state that felt in control, at

peace, open and interested. It was a state of interest in the very experience of what was happening. Simplicity looking over all the chaos of the scenario. I think I was accessing this state because so many other things had overwhelmed the normal thought process of every day. The sheer pain, mental weight and stress of what I'd done to my body meant my mind just gave up. For a period of time, it just couldn't handle what was happening and it lost its hold, it fell away. But 'I' didn't. I had never been more me than right then ...

.....
The irony seems to be that the darkest moment in life can be the very moment the clouds clear and we see the light. What the light illuminates will be different for every individual. It may be something spiritual, it may not be. It may be a clarity of the journey you will now take and your ability to dance with any change. It may be the sudden acknowledgement that you are stronger than you ever believed you were. When the mind can focus on one true goal, even just for a brief glimpse of time, it can come as a relief. It can enable us to strip away the niggles, the stresses and the mundanities, to reveal what really matters.

Mr Naveen Kumar, a consultant surgeon in spinal cord injury for the past nine years, would later become Martyn's consultant following his referral to a specialist spinal unit. Mr Kumar is a quietly spoken, polite and learned man who is, from the moment we first speak, clearly and

unapologetically in awe of his patient. He believes Martyn is a role model who has a lot to teach others in his position. I ask Mr Kumar whether it is usual for patients to be instantly aware they have been paralysed by an accident.

.....

MR KUMAR – Generally this is how they present because it is such a high velocity injury, such an unstable injury to the spine. The spinal cord loses its function altogether. In the early days, the majority of the patients will be in the stage of what we call spinal shock. It is a condition in which all motor and sensory, which means all neural activity, is temporarily shut down. That can last for from a few days to a few weeks. Then generally thereafter, we come across a situation where they usually start getting some movement or sensation.

Injuries to the spinal cord almost always happen at the time of the original accident. Sometimes there are other factors that do play a crucial role in making the situation worse. What we call secondary spinal cord injury on the preliminary or the primary spinal cord injury. But Martyn's was an unstable injury that had done the damage to the spinal cord at that time.

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Leaving his team and his son behind him at Silverstone, Martyn was airlifted to the University Hospital Coventry Accident & Emergency for initial assessment. There, the reality of what he had done very quickly kicked in.

.....

MARTYN – The helicopter landed and I was moved onto a trolley. I was still strapped onto the hard rigid board. My head was locked in one position. I was still and so was the mood. There was no rush. The lack of urgency had in one sense a rather comforting vibe. On the other hand, it brought a strange dread; an unsettling, foreboding dread.

I was wheeled along corridors and into a lift. Eventually I was rolled into a bay in Accident & Emergency. I hoped with all my heart that they would undo all the straps on me soon. Especially the tape holding my head still. The back of my head was pushed against the hard board that I lay on. I wanted to move it so much.

Even though I was in A&E, there was still no rush around me. A few quiet questions from a nurse – who I was, where I was from, etc. A doctor came over. She had similar questions and also enquires, what I knew about the accident. I told her.

Another patient was wheeled in and parked in the bay next to me. A young lady who was in a bad way. She was unconscious and lots of staff rallied around her. The contrast of urgency around her compared to me was stark. After a while she was wheeled off to some other unit. It sounded like it was for urgent surgery. From what I could tell, she had had been in a car crash. Awful. Some young girl's life tipped upside down. I never knew what became of her. I hope she got through it.

.....
Martyn was still thinking of others despite being in the most critical situation of his life. There was no sense of urgency around him because, in contrast to many of his fellow patients, the irreversible damage had already been done. In the eerie calm of his Accident & Emergency bay, he then experienced a moment of solitude that confirmed his ... 'fears' would be the wrong word to use for Martyn Ashton at this point or any other ... that confirmed his instinct that his life had changed forever.
.....

MARTYN – I remember the nurse reaching over me to the wall behind my bed so she could write my name and details on a whiteboard above the bed. I can still hear the noise of the pen on that board. When she moved away, I was left there alone for a moment whilst the nurse and I guess a doctor and other assistants made other things ready and discussed next steps. My head was still taped firmly in place, so all I could do was lie there looking directly up at the upside down (from my point of view) writing on the whiteboard. In blue marker it said my name and under that there was just one word. It took me a few moments to work out what the word was – a combination of hurried handwriting and being upside down of course. After a few moments I could make it out, it said:
Martyn Ashton
Paralysed