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HARRISON RINGEL



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Harrison Ringel won a novice national championship last year, winning in two different classes despite suffering a dislocated wrist.

Riding again

Galloway teen Harrison Ringel grew up on fast bikes, and a leukemia diagnosis could only temporarily keep him down

By AJ Mazzolini | THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

A boy lay in a hospital bed with medicine pumping into his body. The sanitary white sheets and mattress were becoming as familiar to Harrison Ringel as his own bed at home in Galloway. » Doctors said the boy had acute lymphocytic leukemia. He would receive some form of chemotherapy treatment for the next 3½ years — if things went well. » But Harrison wasn't thinking about the cancer. Or why he was the one getting sick, a 12-year-old just starting to really live. His mind wasn't even in the hospital room.

His mind was at the track, on the back of his road-racing motorcycle ripping down the pavement and hugging the tight turns, his favorite parts. “(Racing) has always been something that I’ve used to look past everything else,” said Harrison, now a 15-year-old incoming freshman at Ready High School. “It’s a motivator to get past these things, to say, ‘OK, I’ve got to do this so I can get back on the bike.’ ”

There’s been plenty that Harrison has had to “get past” in his life. In November 2008, he was diagnosed with leukemia, forcing a hiatus in a budding racing career. But Harrison has risen back through the competitive racing ranks after battling the disease and an unexpected stroke on his way to winning a novice national



Harrison Ringel is pictured with his dog, Bow, in 2009, when cancer treatments halted his promising racing career. “Those were hard times,” he said.

RINGEL

FROM PAGE C1

championship in October.

He outperformed older racers on faster bikes to take both the E and D Superstock classes at the Grand National Finals in Atlanta. The two wins even came after a crash dislocated a wrist.

The road to the titles came with more than its share of bumps.

Harrison climbed on his first bike around age 2. At least that's what he's heard; he was too young to actually remember.

"He couldn't even talk yet, but he was riding it around," said his mother, Ginny Ringel. "He insisted on having the training wheels off."

Before long, Harrison had upgraded to a bike with a motor. At only 8 years old, he began racing dirt bikes against riders who were up to several times his age.

"I just sort of rolled over the jumps at the track and other people were jumping over my head," Harrison said with a laugh.

"We had to put an end to that," said Paul Ringel, Harrison's father. "A little too dangerous."

Though Harrison played other sports growing up, none captivated him as racing did. While playing football in middle school, a sticker on his helmet read "I'd rather be racing," much to the irritation of other players. He often missed practices and games to race.

Over the next few years, Harrison graduated to mini-motorcycles and then to a Honda RS 150 outfitted for road racing. Just weeks after moving up to the Honda, he learned he had cancer.

"It was tough to see him not get to enjoy the new bike," Paul said. "He only got to race it a couple times."

"Four times," Harrison specified.

He stopped for a moment. The memory had awakened buried feelings, but only for a moment.

"Those were hard times," the boy said.

Treatments kept Harrison off the bike and out of school for two-thirds of his seventh-grade year. The following year, he spent more time in bed than on wheels, lacking strength because of illnesses brought on by a weakened immune system.

When he felt up to it, Harrison came to the track



PHOTO COURTESY OF PAUL RINGEL

Harrison Ringel is thriving on the track despite having to take medication that can leave him fatigued.

with his father to watch, said David Dick, a fellow rider who has competed with Harrison since the boy first started racing seven years ago.

"To me it's amazing; he never once got down on himself," said Dick, 53. "He was always there, bumming around the track when he couldn't race."

Just when the leukemia had gone into remission and Harrison and Paul had started dusting off the motorcycle, another medical emergency struck.

"One day while I was eating my cereal, my arm started acting funny," Harrison said. "It just kind of flopped around."

The sensation was the onset of a stroke. By the end of the day on June 26, 2009, Harrison couldn't move most of his body. The 13-year-old with the dream of racing professionally was told that even walking normally again could be a challenge.

But something amazing happened, his father said. The next day, Harrison regained mobility — all of it — to the shock of his doctors. An MRI showed signs of a stroke in the boy's brain, yet he was hopping from one foot to the other in the hospital room.

"That was our miracle," Paul said. "Well, one of them, I guess."

Harrison returned to racing the next spring. The cancer on its way out, he was stronger and wiser than before.

"We started out and I used to lap him, but the last couple seasons, he's the one lapping me," Dick said.

Harrison continued to race well, despite medica-

tion that left him tired on race days and made his hair hurt under his helmet, medication he'll continue to take orally until March.

Last fall's national wins, coming on his new Kawasaki Ninja 250, caught the eye of Ted Siljestrom, a representative of Auto Glow collision repair and Motozen Racing. The sponsors rebuilt Harrison's engine and gave the bike a new paint job, complete with a Supermanesque "H" on the side.

"You could barely get him out of the trailer on days he felt really sick," Siljestrom said, explaining the logo's significance. "But once he was on the bike, he was basically untouchable."

Siljestrom said he felt moved after hearing Harrison's story, but the sponsorships were a result of his talent, not out of pity.

"The kid is absolutely talented," Siljestrom said. "Because of his hardships he's had to go through, he's light years ahead of his age maturity-wise. . . . I know it's way early in his career, but I

honestly do see him as a world champion someday."

Before he can get to that stage, Harrison will compete this weekend at the West-East Racing Association's Cycle Jam in Alton, Va. It's another "steppingstone" before upgrading to the next tier of racing, the Superstock 600. He hopes to enter when he turns 16 next summer.

And after that?

"Hopefully MotoGP someday," he said, referring to the world's premier motorcycling championships in Europe.

It's an action-packed world Harrison Ringel is entering, and his mother knows it. Ginny said she gets nervous every time he races, with speeds soaring above 100 mph. But her apprehensions melt away when she sees her son smile on race day.

"People come and watch him race now and say, 'How can you let him do that after all he's been through?' " Ginny said. "And all I can say is, 'How can you not?' "

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