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Speed Freak

Equal parts motocross champion, rally car ace and Evel Knievel, Travis Pastrana is about to embark on his biggest dare yet: saving nascar

By Rod O'Connor



THE REVVING DIRT BIKES JERK forward like horses at the gate as the rain spits down on the Red Bull Catalina Grand Prix, a historic motorcycle race resuscitated by the energy drink maker after a 50-plus-year hiatus. The Pro Class final, the last of a chilly weekend's worth of contests on this touristy island 22 miles off the coast of Los Angeles, is set to begin. The field includes Kendall Norman and Quinn Cody, two Baja 1,000 winners expected to battle for the checkered flag. But all eyes are on the yellow No. 199 Suzuki ridden by a lanky 27-year-old with a goofy grin, who, by his own admission, has very little chance of winning.

“Underprepared and overly enthusiastic,” jokes Travis Pastrana. “That gets you a long way.” He crinkles his face, struggling to remember his last motorcycle competition. “Was it in St. Louis?” A video crew captures Pastrana's every move as he waits for the starting signal. Teenagers in flat-billed caps walk up with their camera phones. Even a gray-haired race official holding a yellow caution flag can't resist sneaking a shot.

Such is the cult of Pastrana— motocross champion, multiple X Games gold medal winner, four-time Rally America winner, stunt performer, MTV star and overall good guy. A gregarious personality who barnstorms across various action sports with daredevil abandon, he has built a large fan base over the past decade. In Catalina's port of Avalon, the buzz of his presence resonates in hotel lobbies, oyster bars and race pits alike. This season, Pastrana will most likely begin his NASCAR career at Phoenix International Raceway in the Nationwide Series, and many in the motorsports world are hoping that buzz will bring some new life—and new fans—to the oval track. For while the sport of NASCAR is still hugely popular, and there's been killer competition in recent seasons, there's a pervasive sense that there's a dearth of hero drivers who are, you know, actually having fun.

And if there's one thing Pastrana knows how to do, it's have fun. The shaggy-haired Annapolis, Maryland, native hopscoches willy-nilly from sport to sport—shifting from the grind of motocross to the high-flying antics of freestyle riding (and in the process nailing the first-ever motorcycle double backflip in competition) to the hair-raising razor's edge of rally car racing. NASCAR is a natural next step, he says, mostly because racing cars has long been one of his obsessions.

"I've always driven everything," he says while relaxing the afternoon before the Catalina race. A college hoops game is playing quietly in his hotel room overlooking Crescent Avenue, Avalon's beachfront pedestrian walkway. "I rolled my first car when I was ten. Given the opportunity, every time I was hurt or had some down time I would drive rally car, do something with four wheels."

And he's been hurt a lot. He's had four ACL reconstructions and two back surgeries; he's broken his tibia and fibula; a metal plate holds his left shoulder together; he's had at least 10 blood transfusions. At 15, during an FMX competition, he separated his spine from his pelvis, leaving him wheelchair-bound for nine months. Doctors said the injury was one of only three documented cases (only two of which involved patients who lived).

And still he's undeterred, persisting as a sort of modern-day Evel Knievel. In 2007 he flipped his dirt bike into the Grand Canyon and hurled himself out of an airplane without a parachute; on New Year's Eve 2010 he jumped his Subaru rally car a world record 269 feet onto a barge in Long Beach's Rainbow Harbor; and, this past fall, he set the world record for the fastest ascent in a car of the treacherous Mount Washington, the highest peak in the northeast. On his MTV show *Nitro Circus*, produced by the same crazies who brought us *Jackass*, Pastrana and a merry band of action stars perform wacky stunts, including backflips on children's Big Wheel tricycles.

If Pastrana succeeds on the notoriously tough NASCAR circuit, it will be his most impressive feat yet—though he'll be the only driver in the history of the sport more likely to get injured outside the stock car than in it. "NASCAR is the safest sport I've ever done," Pastrana says. "But having me in there is more dangerous for everyone else on the track."

Adding to the challenge is the fact that he ignored the advice of his famous NASCAR driver friends Jimmie Johnson and Jeff Gordon. They suggested he dip his toe in the water by starting in the less competitive ARCA or Camping World Truck Series before diving into the Nationwide, NASCAR's number-two series behind the Sprint Cup circuit. He considered their advice but decided to go straight to Nationwide anyway.

"You learn fastest that way. The problem is, you sink fastest that way, too," Pastrana admits. "A lot of times you don't get a second opportunity. Everything I've done my whole life, I jump in with the best." (He's scheduled to run seven races this season, with the goal of running in the 2013 Daytona 500, according to

Michael Waltrip, the former NASCAR star who is partnering in the Pastrana-Waltrip Racing team.)

A big part of Pastrana's decision to pursue NASCAR is the fact that Pastrana-Waltrip Racing is embracing him for who he is. "They were like, 'We want you to keep doing X Games. We want you to keep doing other stuff . But when you're here, we're going to give you the best crew, the best car, the best instruction,'" he says.

As a part owner, Pastrana hopes to create a whole new talent pipeline for NASCAR. "If this team does well, we can bring in other guys from action sports," he says. "We might be able to make NASCAR cool with a younger audience. People talk about conventional sports, but for a 10-year-old, conventional sports are BMX and skateboarding."

Many a talented racer (we're looking at you Dario Franchitti and Scott Speed) has switched to NASCAR and failed. "Are we going to suck in the beginning?" Pastrana asks. "No doubt. I mean, as a driver I hope I get in there and win—you never line up without thinking there's a chance. But that's not going to happen. Luckily, they are letting us build the team our way, and winning leaves a breadcrumb trail."

Pastrana isn't the first action sports star to delve into NASCAR. Five-time AMA supercross champ Ricky Carmichael, for example, is currently racing in the Camping World Truck Series. But Carmichael's fan base doesn't come close to Pastrana's, whose Facebook page boasts more than 1.7 million "likes."

The only other driver in any sport who can be compared to Pastrana in terms of popularity is Danica Patrick, the IndyCar driver who's struggling in the Nationwide series, with only a single top-20 finish.

"Honestly, if I had the year that Danica had this year, that's not really that bad," Pastrana says. "People are going to be watching closely, and they're gonna be quick to judge. And people will say, 'Pastrana's done, he's washed up.' Then I'll have to say, is this something that I can achieve?"

"He's in way over his head," jokes his buddy, heralded FMX rider Ronnie Renner, hanging out in the paddock before the Catalina GP. "But if anyone's gonna find a way, it's Travis. He'll figure it out or crash trying."

ROD O'CONNOR's most death-defying stunt involved an Evel Knievel action figure.

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1. *Dustin Marshall* Says:
[February 13th, 2011 at 4:05 pm](#)

I am 42 years old and a big NASCAR fan but have never been so excited about Nationwide. I am a big Travis Pastrana fan and can't wait to watch him race. Good luck Travis, I'll be rooting for you and hope you win every race.

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