



FINN RICHARDSON

A new normal

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ISSUE
77
SPOKE

For 17-year-old Nelson mountain biker Finn Richardson, it was a regular Saturday afternoon, waiting for school to end and a summer of riding to begin, when an unlucky crash left him with a broken T5 vertebrae and paralysis from the chest down. Five months on, we take a look at what happened and his recovery so far.

I was Finn's Outdoor Education teacher at school last year. Like many students, lots of classroom activities didn't interest Finn, but when he got on his bike, he came to life and his personality shone through. "Mountain biking to me is an escape from normal life, and a way to get outside and express myself," he wrote in a school assignment a few months ago. Finn was really talented on a bike, quietly confident and unassuming. He was so into mountain biking we'd arranged to have a large portion of his final year at school related to riding.

Finn grew up in a valley behind Nelson's Sharlands mountain bike trails. His first bike was a Mongoose BMX. When he was 9, he started building jumps with friends after school and tinkering with bikes, and started racing in his first year of high school. Finn's passion got dad Glenn hooked too, and at 15, Finn began coaching for local kids' mountain biking programme Krankin Kids, and took a job in Torpedo7's bike department.

By the time Finn turned 16 he was racing regularly. Last year, as part of a youth crew supported by Santa Cruz New Zealand, he joined legend Jamie Nicol and the annual old school bus roady from the NZ Enduro up to Crankworx, entering the Air DH, Enduro, and Dual Slalom. Jamie talked about riding together on their way north: "Finn was a really calculated rider. We were sessioning our way down the big jump line at the dirt farm in Otaki. He took multiple run-ups to jumps—he wasn't someone who



just jumped in and hoped for the best. I remember Remy Morton praising him for that, for not just doing jumps because other people were doing them. He worked at his own speed."

After Crankworx, Finn found he was driven more by progressing at jumps than he was by racing. He'd also signed up for a PMBIA Level 1 instructor course for that October. "My plan for 2019 was to go back to Crankworx, do as many local events as I could, and to just have as much fun on my bike as I could." After graduating from school he hoped to race a couple of Enduro World Series events, and ride Whistler.

The Crash

On September 8, as Nelson was preparing to host its first ever All Blacks match, Finn was building some jumps on the family property in Todds Valley. His neighbour Tristan Rawlence describes the trails here as "awkward, off-camber and slow tech." Built by a group of teenagers, the impressive trail network known as the Hedgehog Trails could yield a couple of hours' riding and be linked up with the Sharlands loops.

"I'd finished off the jumps I'd been working on for the past couple of months. I was amped to test them out so I'd invited a friend out to help me." In an instant, Finn's world changed. He remembers the moment clearly: "I hit the first step-down a couple of times and wanted to clear it a bit better. Perhaps we shouldn't have been riding the jumps; they were a bit soft. I went straight over the bars and landed on my head. My helmet came down and smacked into my chest. I broke my T5 vertebrae."

It happened so fast Finn didn't know what was going on until he rolled to a stop. "I felt nothing really. I could wave my arms around but I couldn't feel anything below my chest. The worst outcome of a crash, for me...it

had happened." From that moment, he set his sights on recovering to the highest possible level.

"I was just really uncomfortable and it felt like a rock had been jammed under my back." Finn heard his dad's truck rattling up the road, and he was soon hanging from a helicopter with a paramedic. "It was a scary moment, being winched up. My lungs and ribs were hurting a lot. It was the only time I felt quite a bit of pain. The downdraft was limiting my breathing." It was a short flight up to a landing spot at the top of the hill, where he was put in the helicopter and Glenn climbed aboard. Finn recalls his dad was shirtless, wearing forestry boots and chainsaw pants with a tyre tube for a belt.

Finn remembers the flight to Christchurch. "I was in this perfectly zen state. My body was releasing so much adrenaline and natural painkillers." He remembers they couldn't get a drip in his arm. "I couldn't see out the window but apparently the views were really nice."

Three months in Burwood

Finn was rushed to Christchurch Hospital's Intensive Care Unit for immediate surgery. Afterwards, he had a drip going straight into his femoral artery. "Someone handed us a bag of flyers about living as a paraplegic," Glenn said. Messages of love flooded in and the family started to deal with their new reality.

After three days, Finn was transferred to Burwood Spinal Unit. The first few weeks passed quickly; appointments with specialists, people visiting, coming to terms with the new normal. His family hardly left his side during this time, his mother Claire spending the entire three months of Finn's stay in special family accommodation at Burwood.



Finn's day-to-day life focused on rehab. He described his schedule: "I have a wash in the morning. I get hoisted up into my chair—it's pretty fun. I get my mum and dad to wheel me to the gym. I've got two gym sessions for rehab each day. My first one is at 11:30 and I do upper body stuff for about half an hour. In the afternoon I do another half an hour of more functional exercises. It's pretty incredible. Every second day I have the occupational therapist come in. They teach me things like getting myself dressed, transfers, getting from bed to chair."

After two months he moved into transitional rehab. "It's not as hospital-like; more of a normal flatting situation. You have way less medication, you cook your own meals, and get out into the community. It's cool getting to know some of the other people who have gone through a similar journey. It's nice talking to people who know what's going on, people who have been through here before.

"I've been angry, frustrated, sad, happy. Mostly I'm really happy. It's getting better. There were people much worse off than me in ICU. If I wasn't wearing such a good helmet I could have been tetraplegic. It really puts things into perspective."

Returning Home

The enormity of the injury started to sink in when Finn returned home at Christmas, three months after he'd left. There were challenges for the whole family as he worked towards independence. Claire quit her job to

care for Finn, working through ACC paperwork, juggling appointments, and travelling for specialist rehabilitation. The family modified the house for Finn, putting in a new toilet, ramps, and a seat in the shower.

The mental challenges are bigger than the physical: "It makes me happy to see my friends are still out there riding and haven't been put off. At the same time it makes me so frustrated because I desperately want to be out there as well." Finn said he spends too much time stuck in his own head, and a lot more time on screens. Instagram feeds are full of friends sending jumps, shredding trails, and racing—constant reminders of what life was like before. He still hangs out with friends but they have to find easy activities; two friends recently carried him into the water at Cable Bay. "It was scary because I wasn't floating; I just sank." He's also been on two camping trips with friends.

Finn's closest friends have been impacted significantly by his accident. Good friend Todd Ballance said he was "torn from the inside out" when he heard the news. "I was devastated, angry, and just plain confused about how these accidents happen to such good people. Visiting Finn for the first time about a week after the accident really affected me...trying to stay positive when visiting but also realising the severity of the accident at the same time was a real struggle. I've felt guilty about being able to ride a lot. It's hard not to think about one of your best mates sitting in a hospital bed while you're out riding and having fun."



Glenn and Finn have both told Todd to keep pushing and riding. He said riding helped take his mind off the accident, but there were times when he lost motivation after crashes of his own, and made him wonder whether he wanted to keep riding at all. "But it's become much easier now that Finn's home. We can hang out and do fun stuff and it's cool to see him out on an adaptive bike."

A group of friends turned up for his first lap on his new bike at Codgers Bike Park. Finn had a glint in his eye, excited to finally get out of his chair and see what his new toy could do. "It was amazing being able to access places I hadn't been able to for the past few months. Also a bit of a shock because it was like learning how to ride all over again. Every aspect was different except that it had wheels."

Glenn copes with humour and by looking for the positives, but it's as hard as you would expect for Finn's parents. Racing the Dodzy Memorial Enduro was particularly tough. "I cried at the top," says Glenn. "Last year I was racing with Finn. This year I was on my own, riding Finn's bike. I wasn't as fast as last year. It was weird not riding with Finn."

Finn returned to school in February for his final year, for the social side and routine, but schoolwork doesn't seem as important anymore. He recently spent ten days in Tauranga doing neurophysics rehabilitation. "I came into it with pretty high expectations and they were fulfilled. I put my first pedal strokes in, on my own, on a stationary bike and I had lots

of flickers of movement in my legs. My hope and determination had been starting to falter slightly, I'd been starting to focus more on getting better on my adaptive bike and accepting what had happened. But this has given me more determination and hope that I'll get back on a normal bike someday." Finn will be returning to Tauranga in a month for another stint of neurophysics rehabilitation.

What Next?

Finn hasn't lost his fiery passion for adventure and determination to be the best he can. He had some in-depth goal setting sessions at Burwood and is staying focused on "leading as adventurous a life as possible." He plans to put his energy into adaptive mountain biking and sit skiing. "I'm really excited about sit skiing. It looks more natural, you can still have that flow and keep up with your friends." Meanwhile he's returned to work at Torpedo7, is due to resume coaching for Krankin Kids, and is also learning to drive.

Everything he takes up comes with new challenges now. He's motivated to share insights about his own journey and to increase awareness around spinal cord injuries and the realities of life after them. It's a fine balance between setting his sights on a full recovery and coming to terms with the situation he's currently in, but Finn tries to focus on all the positives along the way.

Follow Finn's rehabilitation journey on Instagram - [@finn_richardson1](#). ◻