

The Big Crash - 1984 - Michigan International Speedway



On lap 26 of the Michigan 200 in September 1984, Derek was almost killed when he had the worst crash of his racing career. It was also the only time he was ever seriously injured in a race car.

A light mist began to fall as he entered turn three. He lost control and hit the concrete wall head on at a speed of approximately 206 MPH. The car literally exploded around him. The doctors told him I had survived the hardest impact that a driver had EVER survived. The car disintegrated, as did much of his body. He air lifted immediately to the intensive care unit of the local hospital.

Injuries included; a crushed left ankle from high velocity impact. Part of front of the lower tibia joint was removed with articular cartilage attached, most of a left foot toe was amputated, a compound fracture to left tibia, multiple fractures to left fibula, fractured left hip socket, multiple fractures to pelvis, broken ribs left side, multiple fractures to left hand, 3rd degree burns to left arm (triceps area), severe dislocations of right foot and ankle, deep abrasions and soft tissue loss to right heel, internal bleeding that was believed to have been caused by a lacerated liver (according to what he remembers the doctors saying).

After being stabilized and multiple surgeries in Michigan during first week after the accident, Derek was transferred to Methodist Hospital in Indianapolis where much of the earlier work on the left left ankle was re-done, as the Indy doctors who were more accustomed to explosive high impact injuries, believed that he did not have enough of a lower tibia joint surface to ever walk properly. They elected to perform bone grafting from his left hip to rebuild the lower left Tibia. At the end of the second round of surgeries he had 18 screws, 4 plates and a 12" rod inserted in my left leg/ankle. In all he had approximately 14 various surgeries over the course of 3 years. Therapy also went on for about 3 years. He recalls well many nights sweating in bed (because of the medications) and having to have the sheets changed in addition to his clothing. he was in hospital for two months, in a wheel chair for two months and on crutches for another three months. Six months after the impact, he attempted to stand on his own feet, which was when the difficulties of recovery really started.

He was on a drug called Percoset for pain, Tigan for the upset stomach, sleeping pills and because this combination still did not settle him down they finally put him on Valium. The Valium contributed to him getting hooked on medication. When lhe realized that he had become

addicted, I called his doctor and advised him that he was going off all medication immediately and all at once. His doctor warned him to wean himself off but no, the stubborn Irishman decided that he would stop everything immediately.

Just like a drug addict would feel, he began to have dizzy spells, sweating, nausea, cravings for the medication and at one stage was awake for two or three days and nights straight. For long periods during the days he would have to focus on a wood knot on the wall above the TV to stop the room spinning in his head. After about three days he experienced a toxic feel all through his body. This was not a pain or a cramp or nausea or a particular discomfort, but it was somehow a combination of all of the above. Slowly but surely, he would have a short time during the day where he would feel ok. As the days wore on, the good feel times became a little longer until they eventually were longer than the "feel bad" times. After about 4 weeks, he was reasonably good and he went back to flat out rehabilitation without chemical assistance (or poison).

17 years later he had to have my left ankle surgically fused as a result of the injuries. We all thought that 17 years was pretty good as originally the doctors told him in Indy that he might not walk properly again and after they rebuilt the ankle with bone grafting they thought I might get 5 good years out of it. Derek loved to prove them wrong.

Believe it or not, Derek was on the grid of the Indy 500 just 8 months later and resumed a full time career racing in 1987. He went on to win the biggest international races of his career (won Sebring 12 hour race twice in 1990 & 1991) *AFTER* his accident.

What an experience and a great time of learning....

