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ALI ROBINSON

TRIATHLON SAVED MY LIFE

WHEN **ALI ROBINSON** CRASHED INTO A BUS LAST YEAR, HE NEARLY DIED. BUT THANKS TO HIS HIGH LEVEL OF PHYSICAL FITNESS, HE'S BACK ON THE START LINE WITH HIS SIGHTS ON KONA

Words Debbi Marco | Photos Main image Romilly Lockyer/Dassi



"I was unconscious and the next thing I heard was the rotors of the air ambulance"



Ali wearing his brace and holding his bike which helped him piece together the cause of the accident

The last thing pro triathlete Ali Robinson can remember about the 21 April, 2014 is riding home from a training session in Thirlmere towards his parents house in the Lake District where he was staying.

His next memory is the rotor noise of the Great North Air Ambulance helicopter blades arriving to whisk him to Newcastle hospital. His accident is a jigsaw with many pieces still missing, but thankfully the most important piece, his body, is complete.

"I was recently back from winter training in Spain at my parents house in the Lake District and was training on roads I'd trained on for years. I finished my session around a local lake called Thirlmere and was cycling home on the A66 a main route

out of the Lake District," recalls Ali, 31.

"My memory stops about a mile before the accident. There are officially no witnesses but what appears to have happened is the bus hit something that blew out both back tyres at the same time."

When Ali received his bike back a few weeks after the accident he could see the forks had been snapped off but the front of the bike hadn't hit anything. It had been taken out from under him and he'd flown straight into the back of the bus which had slowed to stop.

"Although I can't remember, I like to think I'm too experienced to ride around with my head down," says Ali. "I was unconscious and the next thing I heard was the rotors of the air ambulance."

Ali was flown to Newcastle hospital where doctors established he'd broken his skull and had 13 separate breaks through nine vertebrae.

"I was only in hospital for eight days because they were able to put plates in my back and an external brace that screwed into my head and held on my chest keeping my neck in place," says Ali.

"The person who suffered the most was my partner, Vicky, who was in Cambridge the day it happened. She got a very confused phone call from me in hospital. I was already on a lot of painkillers. She had to travel back across the country not knowing if I was paralysed."

One of Ali's fractures was so high on his spine it could have paralysed him from the chest down leaving him unable to breathe and medics unable to save his life.

"There was a view from some of the medics that if you're fit when an accident occurs it speeds up your recovery because your circulation is so good. Had I just been cycling [Ali had been a pro cyclist for years before switching to

triathlon just two years before his accident] it leaves you super fragile on the upper body because you're not doing any weight bearing.

"The swimming potentially saved me," says Ali. "I'd changed shape a lot since starting triathlon and put a lot of muscle on around my back and neck which supported my bones with the unstable fractures."

"My fitness speeded up my recovery but also saved me from paralysis and potentially saved my life."

However lucky he had been, Ali still had to overcome seven and a half hours of complex surgery to fix his broken spine.

"The surgeon was really competent and he was made aware it was my job to race so he knew pinning my neck wasn't an option. That's why I got some pinning and an external brace."

While doctors had done all they could, it was now up to Ali to throw himself into

rehab but he had to be sure he was ready for the challenge.

"There was a period when I came out of hospital that I've had so much of this relating to sport. As a pro cyclist for over 10 years I'd broken my collar bone three times and my hip.

"It's so easy to say 'I'm going to come back stronger or get to where I was', but I didn't want it to be a knee jerk reaction. I had to ask myself 'do I still want this?'"

After three weeks of soul searching Ali decided that triathlon was still for him and he began the long and arduous road of rehabilitation.

"I was in the brace for a total of three months and after that it was a matter of starting to swim and starting to run to see what happened. It was really hard to get back. Psychologically it was difficult, too. I'd always felt more comfortable on a bike than I did walking but now it was 'oh these

pedals are awfully hard to turn round'.

"I was worried I would get on a bike and be all shaky and nervous. That didn't happen but I'm certainly much more aware especially with any vehicle passing me closely. I used to be much more blasé and angry with the driver but now I'm more nervous for my safety.

"It was hard maintaining the motivation for rehab too but I knew how important it was. I could rebuild a level of fitness but if the rehab wasn't done correctly to begin with, I'd be in trouble. If I left my neck too long without rehab, it would stiffen and I wouldn't be able to regain movement. Some days I'd spend a ridiculous number of hours doing rehab when I just wanted to be out on my bike, but what I really needed was to spend an age building up my back muscles."

"Plus if you damage your back it affects alignment, which in turn affects your hips and knees. I always needed to do flexibility

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Ali is now an ambassador for the Great North Air Ambulance. To donate visit greatnorthairambulance.co.uk



work, but the level I have to do it at now to stop getting sore is much higher. It's sometimes frustrating but there's so many worse consequences to what had happened."

Amazingly, just over a year after his accident, Ali was back on the start line of Barcelona 70.3 finishing 25 out of 57 male pros.

"In the morning on the beach waiting for the swim, I was like: This is it. Job done. Anything that happens is a total bonus," says Ali.

"I was back on a professional start line, which is what I wanted to do. I've never enjoyed a race so much. I was all smiles and had a tingly feeling all the way round. I was

really relaxed, too which is not a way I've often felt when racing."

While the accident was undoubtedly horrific, Ali is the first to admit some good has come from it.

"I might have been on route to burn out pre-accident anyway," he says. "I hadn't had a rest or a holiday in 10 years. I was always training as there's never been a time when I thought it was appropriate to have some time off."

Ali is now a charity ambassador for the great North air ambulance which picked him up from the road. "If it hadn't been for them I could have been a road transfer which could have left me paralysed. I was in Newcastle hospital within 40mins rather than 2.5hrs. Their existence is vital for triathletes and outdoor fitness enthusiasts and I'm very grateful to them.

Ali's hopeful the accident will keep his training in perspective, too.

"If I was a few watts off target on the bike or a few seconds off target when doing my kilometer reps would really affect how I felt

that day," he says. "It went far beyond training. It would always affect my self worth. Now I want to hit my numbers but I know there's no point beating myself up about that. Much more serious things go wrong. I know that now.

"Two days before my accident I was having a real beat up fest that I wasn't going as fast as I wanted to. Then I was lying in bed after the hospital thinking 'I was really bothered about that?' Ridiculous!

"My plan is to be at Kona in four years time in the best possible shape, perhaps as the quickest Brit or in the top 10. In the interim I'll be targeting a win in a 70.3 in 2016 and by the end of 2015 I'm looking to be at least first Brit or taking podium places by November and December time."

It's easy to forget that Ali shouldn't be walking let alone racing after his accident, but he sees his path back to triathlon success as absolutely normal.

"People say to me my recovery is amazing, but I think wouldn't anyone have done this?"

"My fitness saved me from paralysis and potentially my life"