

## **‘When I couldn’t move my legs, I knew my life would change forever’**

*How one pro racer survived a crash at the world’s most extreme mountain biking competition*

By Harvey Day  
BBC 3

When Paul Basagoitia is getting ready to drop into a race, he visualises the whole course in his mind from start to finish: each 360 turn, each vertical cliff drop, each flip over a gaping, 60-foot canyon. And back in October 2015, the world class mountain biker was steadying himself at the top of his run at the Red Bull Rampage in the rocky deserts of Utah, in the United States.

What makes the contest stand out - and one of the reasons it’s been called the world’s most extreme mountain biking competition - is that riders get to choose how they want to ride the terrain.

The aim is to successfully navigate your own line down the 1,000-vertical-foot mountain path - roughly equivalent to the height of The Shard, the tallest building in the UK.

“It’s a blank canvas,” Paul says. “You’re essentially able to go down exactly how you want. There’s cliffs, there’s canyon gaps, there’s exposed ridges that you can fall off.

“It’s a very dangerous event but at the same time, it’s the only event that we’re able to showcase our true riding skills.”



Photo: Taras Hipp / Shutterstock.com

It wasn’t Paul’s first Red Bull Rampage event and he was feeling more confident than ever.

“I knew I had a good line. I knew I had the potential to win.”

He was particularly focussed on perfecting one obstacle, a tricky backflip over a deep canyon.

“When I dropped in, everything was going to plan to be honest.

“I was mostly stressed out about the big backflip and I did that perfectly.”

Next, as he raced down the rugged terrain, Paul had to pull off landing a 40-foot drop. But, coming in with too much speed, he overshot by just a couple of feet.

“There’s not really much room for error,” he says.

His pedal got caught on a branch and he flipped over his handlebars, down over a ledge and straight onto his back.

Perhaps surprisingly, he didn’t feel any pain at the time.

"I thought I was gonna be able to get back up and do my second run. That was my intention.

"So my thoughts were like, 'Man, I'm so pissed I just messed up 'cause I had a winning run.'"

But as he tried to get to his feet, he realised he couldn't move his legs.

"That's when I knew my life was gonna change forever.

"I've hit the ground hundreds of times. I've knocked myself out, broken bones, I've done it all - and I've taken a lot harder crashes than the crash I did that day.

"For me to not be able to move my legs and get up, I knew I was in deep trouble."

Paul started having 'flash forwards' about his future.

"I started thinking, 'Man, I guess I'm going to be in a wheelchair. I'm not going to be able to ride a bike ever again.'

"All those thoughts started running in my brain right away."

Paul was helicoptered to hospital from the scene and rushed into surgery. It ended up lasting ten and a half hours.

He had a burst fracture in his T12 vertebra - one of the bones that makes up the spine (back bone) - causing the shattered vertebra to compress his spinal cord.

Doctors had to stabilise his spine and pick the bone fragments off his spinal cord.

They also replaced his 12th vertebra with a titanium cage.

"It was a very nasty procedure.

"Waking up and still not being able to move my feet or legs was super scary. I was in an awful place."

At first, Paul was left without feeling in his legs and he had to use a wheelchair.

Doctors weren't sure if he'd get movement back below his waist.

### **What is a spinal cord injury?**

The spinal cord is a collection of nerves running from your brain into the body within your spine.

The spinal cord carries messages back and forth between the brain and the body.

These messages allow us to move our body, feel pressure and control vital functions like breathing, blood pressure, bladder and bowels.

When the spinal cord is damaged the messages between our brain and the rest of our body can't get through, causing a loss of movement and sensation from below the level of injury.

In those early days in hospital, Paul would dream about riding, until he woke up and his new reality set in.

One of the most surprising - and painful - things, Paul found out, was being fitted with a catheter.

"It was probably one of the hardest things to accept.

"I had no idea that I'd lose the function of my bowel and bladder with a spinal cord injury and I was, uh, yeah I was stressed out.

"I was not happy. It was painful."

Paul decided to document his time in hospital - in part to kill some time during those first three months but also so he could chart his day-to-day progress.

Paul's seven-minute eye-watering struggle with his catheter makes for difficult viewing.

But those videos also captured one of his first, surprisingly-powerful post-accident

triumphs: being able to pee standing up. “I think we take so much for granted in life, right? Who would ever have thought being able to pee on your own is such a blessing?”

“So to get that back after three months was such a huge milestone in my life.

“Still to this day, every time I pee, I pee with a smile. It brings so much joy in me,” he chuckles.

Paul continued documenting his rehabilitation and, after meeting with a director, his early life, career, 2015 accident and long road to recovery were turned into a full-length documentary. The film, *Any One Of Us*, premiered at SXSW Film Festival, recently won a 2020 Sports Emmy and is now available to watch on BBC iPlayer.

“After my accident, I found out there wasn’t much information out there about spinal cord injuries and I hoped my story would help people.”

### **Training wheels**

Paul first started riding without training wheels when he was two years old.

“My dad gave me one good push and I was able to maintain that speed,” he says in the film.

He remembers going into a bike shop with his mum to buy his first racing BMX - and heading to abandoned open spaces after school to ride with other kids who’d built home-made ramps.

“That’s all I wanted to do. I wanted to compete and I wanted to race.”

He quickly made a name for himself, being ranked number one in the world for his age group at just 10 years old. He went on

to establish himself as one of the best slopestyle and freeriders in the world. And there was money to be made in the biking competition world, too, through prizes and sponsorships. The first place prize for the Red Bull Rampage that Paul competed in in 2015 was \$50,000 (£39,000).

But after his accident Paul, who’s now 33 and lives in Reno, Nevada, faced a long, difficult journey.

After being discharged from hospital, he’d do between six to eight hours of physical therapy and training every day.

“It’s the only thing I cared to do, I didn’t even think about it really.

“I literally considered it a job.

“I’d wake up, go to see a physical therapist, go swimming, eat, get massages, get acupuncture.”

And being at home presented new challenges, including depression.

“Returning home became a lonely place,” he says in the film. “Every day I wake up and cry. I’m devastated.”

As the months went on, Paul wasn’t satisfied with how long it was taking him to heal and he became desperate to try anything that might help him get back his ability to walk and ride.

He’d heard about stem cell treatments that could potentially help people with spinal cord injuries. Although the medical evidence wasn’t substantial, he opted to travel to Tijuana, Mexico, to try out the procedure.

But it didn’t help, leaving Paul heartbroken. “The only thing it did was drain my bank account.”

One of the strongest sources of support

turned out to be his partner Nichole. She'd taken time off work to sleep at his bedside for weeks, helping Paul wash. And she provided emotional support, too, in the form of very tough love.

In one scene in the documentary, Paul gets emotional after seeing his dad cry following his accident. "I've never seen my dad cry, never once in my whole life," he says.

"Baby, toughen up," Nichole tells him.

"Her support was very important throughout my whole recovery," Paul now says. "Like, there's no way I could have done this alone."

### **Riding again**

Every year more than 250,000 people around the world experience a spinal cord injury.

And in the documentary, we hear from others who've had life-changing spinal cord injuries, from Jesse, who had a surfing accident, to Tobias, who was injured after accidentally diving into shallow water.

"Through speaking to people who dealt with the same thing, we became a family," Paul says.

"I learned a lot from other people who have spinal cord injuries. They gave me so much guidance about what to expect, what and when things might come back, and that my life's not over.

"People told me they'd been paralysed for 15 years and were living happy lives."

Five years later, Paul can walk around his house unaided and without any pain.

When he's out in public he uses a cane.

And he's still heavily involved in the bike world, managing other athletes.

He's riding again, too, with pedal-assisted bikes.

"That technology has opened up so many opportunities for me as far as being able to go out and ride with my buddies.

"I'm able to ride trails that I definitely would not have the strength to do on my own.

"It's good. Now I'm able to do a lot of the things I used to enjoy."