Motocross Marvel

Discover how Ashley Fiolek turned a disability into a motocross advantage.

By Siobhán McGowan

Noise is an issue for many motocross racers—but not for Ashley.

The growl and whine of the engines. The crunch and splatter of dirt beneath the wheels. The shouts and claps of the crowd. These sounds define motocross almost as much as speed does. Ashley Fiolek is a master of the sport. She won her first Women's Motocross (WMX) Championship in 2008, when she was 18. Then she won it again in 2009, 2011, and 2012, along with many other

awards. And in every race she ever rode, she never heard a thing. That's because Ashley is deaf.

Born to Ride

Being deaf created some challenges for Ashley while she was growing up. But her parents were determined to teach her that although she might be different from other kids, she was still capable of doing everything they did. That includes motocross.

The first time Ashley got on a motorbike, she was only three years old. Her dad took the training wheels off her peewee dirt bike when she was seven. Ashley would spend hours riding through the woods near her home in Michigan. When it would get dark and her parents would tell her through sign language that it was time to go home, she would cry. "I wanted to keep riding," said Ashley. "I think I was born to do it."

Soon, Ashley's passion for motocross became more than just a fun extracurricular activity. She began to compete in races—and won—over and over again. While hard work and practice had a lot to do with her victories, Ashley soon realized that her disability played a role as well.

Super Sense

Most motocross racers rely on noise. They listen to their engines to know when to shift gears, when they have made a mistake, and when they have a mechanical problem. But because Ashley couldn't hear any of these sounds, she taught herself another way to understand her bike.

Being deaf helped Ashley outrace her competition.

Ashley learned how to interpret the vibrations that traveled from the engine to her body while she raced. Depending on what she felt in the soles of her feet as she revved the kick-starter, or the palms of her hands as she squeezed the throttle or the clutch, she could tell what was happening. To compensate for her deafness, Ashley became hyperaware of her sense of touch. This made Ashley more in tune with her bike than most motocross racers. "I feel like I'm part of the bike," says Ashley.

Being deaf also helped remove lots of distractions. Before a race, Ashley couldn't hear other riders talking trash. And when the checkered flag dropped to start the race,

she couldn't hear the roar of engines, or the announcer barking through staticky speakers, or the crowd yelling. Instead of worrying about all those things, she could just focus on riding.

The Finish Line

Ashley's hard work and her unique racing technique resulted in wild success. In addition to her four WMX championships, she won two X Games gold medals. She was the first woman to appear on the cover of a top motocross magazine, and the first to receive full sponsorship from a company.

Now retired from competitive racing herself, Ashley works as an instructor for Women's MX schools in Southern California, where she lives. She also promotes motocross for girls throughout the United States and in countries as far-flung as Iran. "I believe that everyone should have the opportunity to experience motocross," she says.

With Ashley blazing the path, it seems sure that one day they will.

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