

WIN.

WIPE OUT.

A TRACK AT 200
IN THE

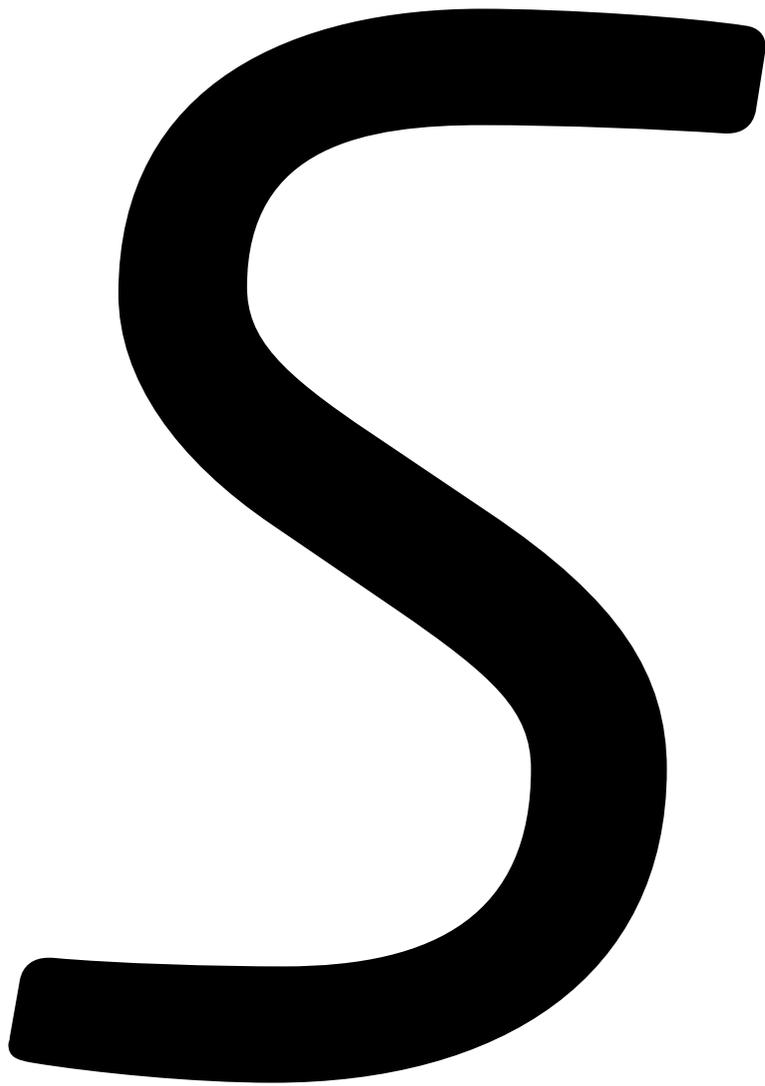


REPEAT

NICKY HAYDEN CAN FLY AROUND
MILES PER HOUR BETTER THAN JUST ABOUT ANYONE. THAT IS, WHEN
HE'S UPRIGHT. THE BUMPY RIDE OF AN AMERICAN
EXTREMELY FAST LANE.

BY JOSH DEAN





So this was how the day would end for Nicky Hayden, rag-dolling through the rain at 140 miles per hour, his season shattered like his motorcycle, a multimillion-dollar machine depreciating rapidly as it shed chunks of titanium and carbon fiber in the gravel shoulder area where Hayden would eventually skid to a stop. “That’s a huge crash!” the Eurosport TV announcer howled, a fairly obvious observation to anyone who had just watched the white, orange and black Honda dip into a corner of the wet track and chuck Hayden, the reigning Moto Grand Prix road-racing world champion, into the air just two laps from a fourth-place finish that he desperately needed.

For nearly 45 minutes, at speeds up to 180 miles per hour, Hayden had fought his way back from 12th place at the Alice Grand Prix de France, in Le Mans, despite a balky bike and torrential rain that caused half a dozen riders to crash. But feeling the pressure of Italy’s Valentino Rossi — probably the greatest road racer of all time and an iconic, curly-haired presence who looms over MotoGP — Hayden came into a corner a little too fast, causing him to brake harder than is prudent on a wet track. Before he could react it was, as he would later say, “sky, gravel, sky, gravel, sky, gravel.”

In MotoGP, the most elite level of motorcycle racing, crashing is inevitable; it’s not a matter of if but when. Learning how to crash, then, is a skill every racer develops: relax (relax!), bring your arms in to your body and let the protective suit do its job. “There’s an art to it,” Hayden says. If you’re moving at 100 miles per hour, even a pool of water would feel like concrete. “So imagine what concrete feels like.” Provided he is not unconscious or immobile, the racer takes inventory of his parts,

starting with his feet and working his way up until he’s pretty sure everything is still functional.

There, just off the hallowed asphalt of Le Mans, the 26-year-old Hayden rose to his knees and slammed his fists into the ground. The TV camera cut to his pit, where the crew chief, Pete Benson, ripped the yellow placards from the board that displayed Hayden’s standing and tossed them to the pavement. In a split second, the world champion lost any chance of retaining his title. Instead of earning 13 points toward his season total and finishing in front of all but one of the riders who led him in the rankings, Hayden earned no points and dropped out of the top 10.

Back at the hospitality tent for Alpinestars, an Italian company that makes the suit, gloves and boots that had kept Hayden’s parts in working order, a smattering of journalists, friends and company men noshed shrimp cocktail in near silence.

Some minutes later, Hayden’s manager, Phil Baker, appeared in the rain, carrying his client’s battered racing suit over his shoulder like a sick child. “He’s O.K.,” Baker said. “Just tore some cartilage in his rib cage.” A technician bagged the suit — covered with scuffs and scratches, but otherwise in decent shape — to be shipped home for autopsy. “It will make a comeback,” the tech said.

Outside, trucks were idling and tents had begun to collapse. If you were so inclined, you could see it as a metaphor for Hayden’s season to date, but it was just a typical mass dismantling at a Grand Prix track. Almost from the second a race concludes, the whole operation — hundreds of brightly painted trucks, air-conditioned hospitality tents, countless cooks and roadies and hawkers of merchandise — packs up and rolls out for the next stop, in this case Mugello, Italy.

Last to leave was the fleet of R.V.’s in which the riders lived for the weekend. And as the day ended at Le Mans, the mood in Hayden’s trailer seemed funereal. The television was silent, frozen on the back of racer Marco Melandri, the words “2 Laps to Go” in the top right corner of the screen. Hayden had paused the tape at the moment immediately before his crash.

He was sitting in a recliner next to a stationary bike he uses to warm up before races, his stocking feet sunk in the tan pile carpet. He’s a handsome kid with peaked eyebrows that give him a bit of a Cheshire Cat look, particularly when he’s smiling. As the biggest American star in a sport largely comprising Europeans, Hayden knows how to make a personal statement. He likes to experiment with hair style and color — a low point being a buzz cut dyed with leopard spots — and has made a few feints in the direction of facial hair. The European news media have taken to calling him “Trick Daddy” or “the Kentucky Kid,” and in 2005, he received the high honor of being named one of People magazine’s “50 Hottest Bachelors.” Both Michael Jordan and Brad Pitt have declared themselves fans, and Hayden is about to be the star of his own MTV reality show.

In his trailer, though, Hayden was merely the guy who choked. His expression was flat, his hair hidden under a Michelin beanie. He fidgeted absently with the remote. “I don’t like watching other people crash, but I don’t mind watching myself,” he said and then replayed the tape.

Hayden is enormously dedicated; losing destroys him. When he’s not racing, he’s thinking about racing, or working out to get himself in racing shape, or else sitting in the garage with his race team, talking about racing. He has not been shy about expressing his frustration with the bike Honda Racing delivered for the 2007 season — a rule change forced all manufacturers to build slightly less powerful bikes and Honda’s had so far been a disappointment — but on this day he accepted the blame. It is often said that Hayden, unique among his colleagues in that he grew up riding on dirt tracks, loves to go sideways and is comfortable

NOT IN KENTUCKY ANYMORE Nicky Hayden crashes in the rain — again — this time at the British Grand Prix on June 24 (previous page). The world champion a few weeks later, in Germany (right).

Josh Dean is an editor at Play.



Roger Lee. (Not to mention Johnny Depp, who surely played one sport or another.)

To get to the Hayden family compound, you head around the back of a Kmart, through the parking lot, past the loading docks and over a railroad track where you'll find the sign for Earl's Lane, named for the Hayden family patriarch as a last resort because he couldn't come up with a variation on Hayden or Rose (that's Mrs. Hayden) that wasn't already registered somewhere in the county. In the founding days of the Hayden estate, the road had no name and the Haydens picked up their mail at a barbecue joint on the main drag, but when Rose opened a plant nursery, it seemed like a good idea to have an address. Also, Earl says a friend told him, "You can't just tell the fire trucks to come up the old dirt road."

Earl Hayden has always had a thing for motorcycles. He was a dirt track racer, and when it came time to settle on a girlfriend, it only made sense that she too would be compatible with the sport. As Earl tells it, Rose rode even faster than he did, and besides, he was a bit wild and prone to spills. Nicky chose the number 69 for his bike because that was his dad's number; Earl chose it because it read the same way whether he was upside down or right side up.

From almost the day they could walk without wobbling, Earl's three sons were planted on motor bikes and prepped to become racers. Four hours a day, seven days a week, he drilled the boys and also Jenny, the older of his two daughters, who would win an amateur national championship at 12 before giving up motorcycles for tennis. (The younger sister, Kathleen, rode too, if only to maintain the esprit de corps.) To pay the bills, Earl performed a variety of odd jobs. He raised

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when the back end is "loose," meaning unstable and sliding. So, yes, the rain fogged his visor and numbed his hands, but it also probably gave him a slight advantage. This one hurt.

"I know fourth isn't great, but it would have been by far my best result of the year," he said, his Kentucky twang absent of intonation. "And I let it get away."

I asked him if he ever thinks about last year, if it's at all helpful in moments like this to remember that he's still the world champion, the man who ended the reign of the great Rossi.

"Oh, from time to time fans bring up the poster" — he was referring to an image of himself at the final race of last season, on his knees next to his bike, weeping into his hands — "and it still puts a smile on my face. But it seems like a long time ago now."

Le Mans is like another world compared with Owensboro, Ky. (pop. 54,067) — known as "the OWB" to Hayden, its latest favorite son. For a small Ohio River town full of churches and car lots, Owensboro has proven to be a rather fecund sports breeding ground. Seven Nascar drivers hail from there, including the brothers Waltrip and Green, as do the former N.B.A. shooting guard Rex Chapman, the Texas Rangers' outfielder Brad Wilkerson and the three Hayden boys: Tommy, Nicky and

thoroughbred horses, then opened a car wash and then a used-car lot, called 2nd Chance Auto Sales, which he runs to this day.

"Tommy's first race was a week before he was 3, with training wheels," Earl says, as if he were discussing a standard rite of passage for toddlers. "The week after, we took his training wheels off." Did the boys ever ride bicycles? It seems wrong to ask.

For 35 weekends a year, the Hayden family would pack the motorcycles, the lawn chairs, the tents, the coolers and the Frisbees into an old trailer with "Earl's Race Team" painted on the side and hit the road, moving from dirt track to dirt track until the boys began to gain some notice. Tommy was the first to be signed to a sponsored team, but once word got out that he had an even faster younger brother, Nicky soon followed, and the whole ritual has repeated itself with Roger Lee. All three of them would win multiple national amateur championships and turn professional before graduating from high school, eventually advancing to the top level of racing in the United States, the American Motorcyclist Association Superbike Series, where Tommy and Roger Lee still race today. (Superbikes are one step down from MotoGP, the primary difference being that superbikes are modified general-production motorcycles, while G.P. bikes are prototypes and don't share a single part with showroom models.)

Although all the Haydens were talented, Nicky was even more so.

Tommy was three years older, but when the two raced head-to-head Nicky would inevitably catch and pass his brother. “That didn’t bother Tommy,” Rose Hayden says. “He knew it was coming.” Perhaps Nicky was merely born with a little bit more Earl in him. “Nicky’s been talking about being world champion since he was 5 or 6 years old,” Earl says, “back when he was reading Cycle News by flashlight.”

You would be forgiven for thinking this is a familiar formative tale — domineering father forces his kids to give up their childhoods to chase his own unfulfilled dreams, working them by firelight, er, flashlight — but to visit Earl’s Lane is to find a contented clan.

“I know what opportunity I’ve got here, and I don’t want to let it get away,” says Nicky. “Winning races is the best feeling in the world, and I just feel guilty if I do anything that is going to affect my performance. I just feel like I’d be letting a lot of people down if I didn’t take this as seriously as I do. I don’t take shortcuts, am not a party boy, don’t get caught up chasing girls.” This is not directed at Valentino Rossi, but it could be. Like many famous racers past and present, the Italian has shown an affinity for the perks of fame. Hayden less so. (This is not to suggest that he’s monkish, by the way, just that he’s not nightclubbing or autographing breasts.) “If I do my job right — work now and play later — I won’t have to worry about it,” he says.

Hayden is gone most of the year, but when he’s home, he lives in an apartment above the six-car garage behind his parents’ house. Until he left the United States for MotoGP in 2003, he still shared his childhood bedroom with Roger Lee; Rog, as he’s known, has since moved next door, to a stone house across the pasture where Earl’s fluffy white alpacas graze. Tommy lives nearby with his fiancée and her daughter. Every evening at 6, Rose sets out dinner, and whoever is in town comes by to eat, including various friends and extended family.

“My first year was tough,” Hayden says. “Not only was I trying to learn the bikes, everything was so new. The traveling, the way of life . . .” The thought trails off for a second. “I think coming from a big family made it a little bit harder, because I grew up with two brothers and we were really close. We were together day in and day out, riding, training, practicing, and then all of a sudden . . .”

Today all three Hayden boys have a retinue of agents, managers and trainers, and so Earl mostly just provides moral support. He and Rose split up the travel duties, one heading overseas to be with Nicky, the other to wherever Tommy and Roger Lee happen to be racing in the

AMA Superbike Series. The entire family (except Kathleen, who was in school at the University of Kentucky) were there in Valencia, Spain, last October to celebrate with Nicky when he dethroned Rossi and won the world championship. “One of the proudest moments I’ve had at a race-track for sure,” Tommy recalls.

For one weekend every July, worlds collide when both MotoGP and the AMA Superbike Series hold events in Laguna Seca, Calif., meaning that it’s possible to see three Haydens flying around the same track as the rest of the Haydens cheer from the stands.

“I don’t think they’ll ever totally retire,” Rose says, when asked to imagine what it will be like when the Hayden boys hang up their leathers and there are suddenly 52 open weekends on the calendar. “It’s pretty much all they know.”

But for argument’s sake, what would she and Earl do?

“Have a life,” she says.

To view it from here in America, MotoGP seems pretty marginal, but it’s actually a global phenomenon that Mario Andretti, who would probably know, recently called “the most exciting form of motor sports.” The circuit has 18 races (held in 16 countries), and more than 300 million viewers tune in to watch each of them. As many as 200,000 fans turn out in person, legions of them arriving by motorcycle, in full leathers worn for the entire weekend, which is a little like wearing knickers and golf spikes to the Masters. On Fridays, in locations as far-flung as Qatar and Malaysia, the racers practice and experiment with their bike setups, testing tires and tinkering with things like traction control until the rider feels the bike is optimized for that particular track. The qualifying laps come on Saturdays, when riders jockey for the all-important start position: they make a pit stop toward the end of the one-hour session to switch from regular practice tires to ultrasticky (and ultrasoft) ones that will produce the fastest lap times of the weekend but can also begin to disintegrate after one or two laps; thus, they are useless for races. There are no pit stops during an actual race: riders must complete the entire 60- to 80-mile course on a single 21-liter tank of gas and on the same tires. So carefully calibrated are the bike computers that racers will often run

RIDERS WANTED, ORPHANS PREFERRED **MOTOGP BY THE NUMBERS**



202 **NICKY HAYDEN’S TOP SPEED**, reached at the Chinese Grand Prix in May. MotoGP bikes, which weigh about 300 pounds and produce more than 220 horsepower, are among the fastest accelerating machines on earth (0 to 62 in 2.1 seconds); at full throttle, their engines rev at more than 18,000 r.p.m.’s.



60+ **THE MAXIMUM LEAN ANGLE** (in degrees) of a rider while he’s cornering. Only a tiny patch of tire rubber (smaller than a credit card) keeps the motorcycle on the road. Hayden’s knees, which actually slide on the pavement in the corners, are covered with hard plastic protectors. By race’s end, they are almost worn through.



4.0 **THE NUMBER OF SECONDS** it would take a Grand Prix bike to go from 0 to 62 m.p.h. and back to 0. Remarkably, G.P. bikes can decelerate more quickly than they accelerate, thanks to huge carbon fiber disc brakes. When braking at maximum power, a rider rises up and uses wind resistance to help slow down, as in the photo of Hayden above.



**THE BIKES ROAR WITH SUCH FEROCITY THAT IT'S
DAMAGING TO THE EAR TO STAND NEAR THEM. THE SOUND
CAN APPROACH 130 DECIBELS, OR ONLY
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out of gas on their cool-down laps, riding on the last threads of their tires more or less 45 minutes after they started.

Up to 20 riders compete in each race, starting on the grid in rows of three. Starting position is crucial: a rider can't run at full throttle until he's clear of the field; as long as someone is in front of him, he has to ride carefully and wait for a chance to pass, meaning that any riders who can get in front of the traffic tend to build big leads. The first corner is critical, and one of the most important skills a rider can have is the ability to launch off the starting line within milliseconds of the gun without overpowering the bike and popping a wheelie. For a while, manufacturers were experimenting with computerized launch control, but in a rare victory of man over machine, all have reverted to the old-fashioned hand throttle.

Like Formula 1, MotoGP is a technological arms race, the nuances of which could sizzle your synapses. Every single piece of a bike — every bolt and screw — is custom-made, making the machines almost impossible to value. The result is a mechanized sculpture able to go from 0 to 60 miles per hour in just over two seconds. Each bike is a work in progress, tinkered with after every ride and modified to suit track and weather conditions or a racer's "feel" at that particular moment. Once fired up, the motorcycles roar with such ferocity that it's damaging to the ear to stand near them. At full throttle, the sound of a MotoGP bike can approach 130 decibels, or only slightly less than that of a 747 at takeoff.

"The bikes are designed to do everything as perfectly as possible," says Neil Spalding, a British motor sports journalist and the author of the book "MotoGP Technology." "They achieve unbelievably well when they're correct, but they're absolutely horrible when they're not. Finding that sweet spot is difficult."

There are any number of theories why MotoGP has not caught on in the United States, including the fact that races tend to take place overseas (the three-year-old Red Bull U.S. Grand Prix at Laguna Seca has been the only American stop on the MotoGP tour, though Indianapolis will be added next season). But perhaps the most obvious reason is the lack of a consistent American star.

In addition to Hayden there are three Americans currently on the circuit: John Hopkins, Kurtis Roberts and Colin Edwards, who rides on Rossi's team. Because American riders tend to come up racing on dirt, foreign sponsors rarely seek them out, preferring to recruit from the ranks of Europeans groomed on pavement. This wasn't always the case. Kenny Roberts Sr., known as "the Cowboy," won three world championships, starting in 1978, and several other Americans (most notably the former AMA champion Randy Mamola) followed him overseas, but Roberts thinks that the days of American dirt trackers switching over to Grand Prix are probably gone. "Nicky was very lucky that he got out when he got out," Roberts says. "It's really difficult to transfer to this type of racing now."

His son Kenny Jr. was the last American before Hayden to win a title. That was in 2000, a year that is especially notable because it marked the end of the pre-Rossi era. Rossi arrived the next season after winning championships in both lower classes and went on to win five straight G.P. titles, an unprecedented feat that has made him one of the world's most popular and highest-paid athletes, at an estimated \$30 million a year.

To go to a MotoGP race today is to attend a meeting of the cult of

Rossi. Vast swaths of any given crowd will be clad in canary-yellow Rossi apparel or sporting his number, 46. So pervasive is the mania that, at Le Mans, I spotted Rossi stickers affixed to laptops in that alleged bastion of objectivity, the media room. "There was one Muhammad Ali," Kenny Roberts Sr. told me with no apparent irony, "and there's only one Valentino Rossi."

Such was the scene Nicky Hayden entered in 2003, recruited by Honda (already his superbike sponsor in the United States) to join MotoGP as Rossi's teammate. Though most racers work their way up MotoGP's two lower tiers, a sort of farm league that races the same weekends on the same tracks, Hayden was sent right to the top. He had to learn new bikes and new tracks on the fly while playing second banana to a global sporting god.

"Any young American coming in, let's be honest, 90 percent of people want to see you fail," Hayden says. "That's just a reality, and nothing I did at first was ever good enough. Over time, I've got things straight."

That first season, he finished fifth overall in the series and was named rookie of the year. The next season was rougher — Hayden struggled with his bike and took eighth — but when Rossi left to ride for Yamaha in 2004, Hayden became Honda's top rider. He rewarded the team's confidence with a third-place season finish and established himself as one of the most flamboyant riders in the sport, dubbed the Kentucky Kid for his Appalachian twang and his seemingly wild racing style. (Hayden says that to this day when he pulls out his passport in European capitals, people yelp, "Kentucky Fried Chicken! Kentucky Derby!")

The 2006 season was like something out of a heartwarming Disney sports movie: the kid who grew up at the end of a dirt road in Kentucky wins the world championship in dramatic fashion, beating the most famous man ever to ride a bike. Like any feel-good story, this one had a crucial moment of truth. The Kentucky Kid had led Valentino Rossi for much of the season, but Rossi overcame his struggles to close within 8 points of Hayden by the second-to-last race of the year. That's when Hayden's teammate, a diminutive Spanish rookie named Dani Pedrosa, made a monumental blunder: he lost control and crashed into Hayden, ending his race and seemingly his chances at winning the title.

In a post-race news conference, Hayden hid behind giant sunglasses and told reporters, his voice cracking, that he felt his lifelong dream had just been snatched from him. Asked if he could forgive Pedrosa, he answered, "If it costs me the championship, it's something I could live with for the rest of my life."

Rossi went to the season finale in Valencia with his own 8-point lead. Hayden's only shot was to win and for Rossi to finish third or lower. In the view of just about everyone, Hayden included, he had almost no chance.

Hayden appeared in Spain with new graphics stitched on the back of his leathers: a hand of playing cards, a pile of poker chips and the words "All In." He said he was going to win or crash — which would have really hurt, since he had broken his collarbone in the crash with Pedrosa. As it turned out — and always does in the movies — the antagonist miscalculated. Rossi, who rarely crashes, slipped on a corner early in the race, and Hayden cruised to a third-place finish. He won the world championship by 5 points.

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WIN. WIPE OUT. REPEAT.

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“I remember Sunday night I went to my pit box before the awards ceremony, and there was the banner that said, ‘Nicky Hayden, World Champion,’ and I just lost it,” Hayden recalls. “The idea of growing up to be a world champion, it just seemed so far away. My parents gave up a lot, and there are a lot of bumps and bruises and it hurts sometimes. So you definitely have to be prepared to suffer a bit. It’s not always just a big cupcake ride.” Here it is worth noting that one trait Earl Hayden surely passed on to his son is a natural gift for the colorful, sometimes confounding aw-shucks aphorism

On a sweltering day in mid-June, nearly a month after Le Mans, I found my way to Earl’s Lane, where Hayden was enjoying a rare three-day break from the grueling — six races in eight weeks — European leg of the season. In contrast to the last time I’d seen him, slumped in his trailer after the crash, he was smiling and expansive, despite spending the previous day running a relay from couch to toilet because of a bout of food poisoning caused by some bad airplane food.

“Welcome to the OWB,” Hayden said, strolling out of his garage in cargo shorts and sandals. “Your first time?” Also on the scene at Earl’s Lane was the crew of the MTV show, which had just accompanied Hayden to the chiropractor, where he had gotten a spine adjustment and taken a foot bath while chatting with ESPN’s Dan Patrick by cellphone. If an MTV reality show can be considered a marker of stardom, then Hayden is finally on his way to becoming an American teen idol. The show, called “The Kentucky Kid,” will follow a year in Hayden’s life and function like the Owensboro installment of “The Real World.”

At this moment, the cameras were trained on a nearby paddock where two of Earl’s donkeys were getting frisky. Recently, the donkeys have multiplied, as have the miniature ponies that Earl is trying to breed into even tinier ponies, with the goal of one day owning a horse the size of a small dog. Earl says he has also “got a guy” shopping around for some giraffes — an addition that would require an electric fence, “because I’d hate for them to eat up all my dang trees.” He’s also in the market for a zebra-donkey hybrid known, naturally, as a zedonk. “I’m not sure we’re ready for any giraffes,” Nicky said.

The Hayden brothers refer to their dad as Earl the Squirrel, or just Squirrel, and the first thing Nicky did after crossing the finish line for his first MotoGP win, in Laguna Seca in 2005, was to yank the Squirrel onto the bike and take him around the track on a victory lap, an American flag fluttering cinematically behind them.

“I can’t say I’ve had as much fun this year,” Hayden told me, standing in the shade of the barn. “The bike’s not working for me. I’m fighting it and I crashed, so I’m riding injured.” (In addition to the torn cartilage, he broke a rib at Le Mans. He’s also still nagged by his collarbone, the one he had broken in the crash with Pedrosa.) “But still my job’s a dream, and I’m sure it will turn around.”

A few days before heading home from Europe, Hayden finally got the new chassis he’d been wanting, as well as a new exhaust pipe. As a result, he’d had his best finishes of the season and finally returned to the podium after the ninth race in the series, in the Netherlands, moving back into the top 10 after taking third behind Rossi and the point leader, the Australian Casey Stoner, who rides for Ducati. He finished third again at the next race, in Germany, and suddenly things were looking up going into Laguna Seca, where he’d won the last two years. Laguna would also be special because Kawasaki had arranged to give Roger Lee a bike and an exemption to take part in his first-ever MotoGP race — perhaps a test drive for the next member of Earl’s race team to join the circuit. Alas, disaster struck again: another rider collided with Nicky on the first lap, damaging his brakes and forcing him to drop out later in the race. (Roger Lee, on the other hand, gave the Haydens something to cheer about: he rode well and finished 10th.)

As Neil Spalding explains it, a motorcycle racer is far more important, relative to his machine, than an auto racer is to his, which makes sense when you consider how physically demanding MotoGP is. A rider

leans hard into every turn, getting so low that his 300-pound bike nearly brushes the track. As he comes out of the turn, he must yank the bike upright, all while going at top speed. When braking, he stands up, using wind resistance to help slow the bike, then drops into a crouch for full-throttle sprints. Hayden is strong and lithe and, owing to his long career on dirt bikes, very comfortable muscling his bike around.

More than ever before, the results this season have been influenced by technology. Following the rules change, Ducati showed up with a superior bike, and Stoner has dominated. The more manufacturers rely on computer controls, the more it harms the guys like Hayden and Rossi, who are regarded as the purest racers. “Futuristic things like traction control, it’s cutting down the role of the talent,” says Randy Mamola, the ex-racer and now a television commentator. “If you put [Stoner] on Nicky’s bike, he wouldn’t have won any races. I guarantee that.”

“I think we finally got the bike right,” Hayden told me in Kentucky. “I hope so.” He was just back from a 35-mile bicycle ride with Tommy, part of a grueling workout schedule set by his trainer (a former professional cyclist who lives in Florida) and uploaded daily to his computer, where results are plotted and studied. Rose Hayden told me that the first thing her son does when he gets home from abroad is to go for a run or a bike ride and that the difference between Nicky and Tommy, who’s also a fitness nut, is “Nicky might overdo it. When Tommy’s body tells him that’s enough, he’ll quit. Where Nicky will think, I’ve got another 10 minutes in me.”

When the Hayden boys were just starting out, they had promised their father that they would never smoke, drink alcohol or experiment with drugs. “I’m not going to put my life and savings on the line and then you go and waste it,” Earl says he told them. Hayden had never tasted alcohol until after last year’s final race, when the celebratory Champagne was passed around the podium. For once, he didn’t just shake it up and spray it on the umbrella girls. “He said, ‘Dad, what do you think?’” Earl recalls. “I said, ‘It’s probably O.K.’”

Accordingly, the humble Earl’s Lane manor has begun to show the trappings of the Hayden brothers’ success. After winning his championship, Nicky gave his younger sister, Kathleen, his Mercedes, and he told me he’s thinking about giving Jenny the blue Bentley that sits in the garage if he can win another title. The compound includes a swimming pool and a tennis court, as well as the garage that houses Nicky’s apartment and the fancy cars. One entire bay is filled with racks of used leathers (some of them dodgy vintage outfits once worn by Earl), a huge case of trophies and a row of motorcycles that includes the 600cc Supersport Honda on which 18-year-old Nicky won his first AMA championship, in 1999, beating Tommy by 5 points to become the youngest-ever champion in United States history. Next to it are the green Kawasakis on which Tommy won two AMA championships of his own (in 2004 and 2005) and, Nicky said, a “spot saved for Rog.” He pointed to an empty space between Tommy’s bikes and his own most-treasured possession: the Honda on which he won the championship.

“It’s the one thing I put in my contract,” Hayden said. “If I ever won I could keep it, and Honda came through.” The fluids had been drained and the battery removed, but Hayden has promised his friends he’ll fire it up again someday. Maybe, he joked, he’ll ride the multimillion-dollar machine in the Owensboro Christmas parade, tossing out candy canes at 200 miles per hour. The only actual working motorcycle in the garage is a replica of his Grand Prix bike, which Honda sells in its showrooms. “I’ve only ridden it twice,” Hayden said. “It’s hard to do 35 on a side street. I’d get carried away — not meaning to, but I get paid to go fast.”

He left the garage and headed into the hot Kentucky sun. Tommy had just arrived, and Roger Lee would be there any minute. The next morning, Nicky was to fly out early to meet his team in England, but right now it was just about time for dinner.

“It’s my way to get away from the drama of MotoGP,” he said of coming here to far western Kentucky, enduring a couple of flights and a good hour in a car just to have 72 hours on Earl’s Lane. “I like to just come home here and kick it with my people and chill.” Rossi, who lives in London, “had to leave his home country because he couldn’t go out in public. At least I get to come home.” ■