
Famous abroad, anonymous at home

Contributed by asap
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A young MotoGP champion shares his tips for winning and odd experiences with RYAN PEARSON. He's an international star, but not a national one.

Such is 25-year-old Nicky Hayden's conundrum as world champion of the elite MotoGP road race series, the world's top level of motorcycle racing. After a teammate crashed into him in his second-to-last race in Portugal, Hayden came from behind to take the title from seven-time champ Valentino Rossi last month in Spain.

"I came a long way. I grew up in Kentucky on a dirt road," he said. "To go into the Europeans' backyard, and take their title back to Kentucky, it definitely sent a few fans home mad, but I'm happy."

His face is increasingly recognized across Europe, Asia and the Middle East for his appearances before crowds of 150,000 and in magazines like the Italian Vanity Fair. But when he returns to his home in Kentucky, he's nearly anonymous.

Gearheads here are caught up in NASCAR and dirt biking. The technical nature of motorcycle road racing — extreme braking, tight corners and windy tracks — somehow doesn't jibe with our American style of full speed ahead.

"I feel bad because I think it's a great sport and it's been really good to me, so I'd like for the American audience to get into it," Hayden told asap from Valencia, Spain, where he's already testing out new bikes for next season. "But honestly, it's nice to get away from it all. Over here, it's quite a zoo."

Not that he doesn't have American admirers. He rides for the Honda team and has sponsors including Red Bull and a former Chicago Bull named Michael Jordan. He won a new BMW as the series' top qualifier, and to help celebrate, Jordan rode a lap with him.

"It's pretty cool," Hayden said. "Not a lot of people can say they got to burn a hot lap with MJ riding shotgun in a new Beemer."

We asked Hayden what it takes to be a MotoGP star. His answers — from leaning deep into curves to lonely holidays on the road to bad Chinese food — are below:

ENTERING CORNERS

"We do speeds up to 215 miles an hour. ... We have carbon fiber brakes so they stop really aggressive. ... It takes a lot of upper body strength to hold on and keep yourself from going over the handlebars. You're hanging on with everything. As you get closer to the corner, you start your backshifting. You change gears from sixth gear — which is top gear — down to second gear or third gear. As you finish your braking zone, you release your brakes and start to lean into the corner."

HOW TO LEAN

"There's no room for error. You make a mistake here, you normally get hurt. ... We use our body weight a lot — lean off the bike. We actually touch our knee on the ground to give us a bit of feel and give us a feeling of how far we're leaning over. ... The secret is not to lean real far. The more you can keep the bike upright and on the fat part of the tire, the more contact you have and the faster you can carry."

ON CRASHING

"A lot of it is you just try to push the issue too far, you try to push too hard. The main thing is you run out of traction. You get into the heat of the moment and try to brake too late into the corner. You carry too much lean angle and too much speed and physics tells you it's not going to work. You've got to push the edge, and just try to get away with it, get away with it. And sometimes it catches up with you. But if you want to be a world champ, you've got to be willing to ride on that limit for as long and as hard as you can."

ENDURING INJURIES

"I've broken bones and had my share of operations. But I've been pretty lucky, and get to see the world chasing my dream. I get on my hands and knees every night and think how lucky I am. ... When you crash these things, they hurt. You risk a lot every time you throw your leg over one of these bikes. ... I truly enjoy racing motorcycles when the setup is good. But when the setup is bad, it's hard work. At times it feels like it's trying to kill you — to just throw you down the road."

LEAVING FAMILY BEHIND

"When I first came to Europe it was hard. I came from a family with two brothers and two sisters. To pack up and go live out of hotels and in a motor home for months at a time hasn't been the easiest thing. Spending holidays over in countries where you don't even know what you're eating. ... I go to countries that I don't necessarily always like or even feel safe. Like in Qatar, they've got metal detectors to get in your hotel room. You definitely go places where American people aren't really liked."

asap staff reporter Ryan Pearson got on a motorcycle once wearing shorts and burned his leg. He hasn't returned to two-wheelers since.