

**Life and Limb: Ken Roczen Goes After an Incredible Comeback**  
**A year after Ken Roczen almost lost his arm in a horrific crash, the Supercross superstar attempts a comeback that might actually be impossible.**

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Roczen's scarred forearm

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He'd ridden the same line at least 30 times that day, so he knew full well about the kicker. Calf-high and seemingly innocuous, it ran across the track between the larger, more visible jumps in the second rhythm section. To the crowd, and from overhead cameras, it looked like a bump or a shadow. But Anaheim had gotten rain before the third race of the 2017 Supercross season, and the dirt on the field at Angel Stadium was soft or rutted out in places, a bit unpredictable. Then again, so is everything in Supercross.

Coming out of the turn 11 minutes into the main event, holding steady in third place, [Ken Roczen](#) gunned his Honda CRF450R toward the inside and launched off the first jump, catching an unremarkable 12 feet of air and covering some 35 feet before touching down. If you're one of the millions of fans or accident-porn addicts who've seen the footage online, you know what happened next.

Roczen's back wheel rolled through a rut at the bottom of the kicker at the exact moment that his bike's rear shock unloaded the energy it had absorbed in the landing a nanosecond earlier. This would have been fine if he wasn't about to launch 40 feet off the next big jump. Like a kid being power-bounced on a trampoline, Roczen was helpless. His feet came off the pegs, his butt came off the seat and horizontal he went, flailing his legs as humans do when they're airborne against their will. Then Number 94, the German-American heartthrob poised to assume the mantle of Supercross's next big hero, ditched his bike and hurtled toward the ground.

"I was trying to get myself in a better position and brace for impact," Roczen tells The Red Bulletin, sipping coffee on a winter morning at a breakfast joint near his recently purchased beach house in California's Orange County, where he and his fiancée, Courtney Savage, stay when they're not home in Florida.

"But you know, it's impossible when you're in the air — once you're flying."

The crash immediately entered the pantheon of great motorsport smash-ups.

When Roczen slammed into the dirt, the crowd of 40,000 at A2 (it's the second race held in Anaheim each year) issued a stadium-rumbling groan, then fell silent.

"It took the energy out of the building," says veteran motorsport reporter and commentator Jason Weigandt. "It was very weird and somber after that. It was too heavy." That wasn't just because the crowd could tell that Roczen's injuries were severe; it's because everyone knew what his ailments might mean for the sport, whose reigning champion, Ryan Dungey, was a few races away from retirement. All of Supercross — the fans, the industry — needed a star. And Roczen, with his finesse, skills and Gosling-esque good looks, was their man. Not that Roczen was thinking about any of this, or registering how quiet the crowd had become. All he could hear were the voices of medics hovering over him and the collective whine from the engines of 21 other racers.

Roczen's left arm took the brunt of the fall. Still conscious and somehow not in shock, he couldn't get a look at the damage. But the agony, coupled with his inability to sit up on his own, triggered a sense of dread. "I've had enough injuries to know when something's broken," he says, stabbing at a pile of eggs Benedict and itemizing a career of bodily devastation, which includes a chronic lumbar fracture, eight broken ribs, a collapsed lung and a shattered collarbone. "I mean, I'd fallen from so high in the air that something had to give. My arm was completely demolished."





Roczen is motivated to win  
© Joe Pugliese

Roczen was born fast. So fast, in fact, he showed up six days premature after a labor that lasted just 30 minutes. "He was in a hurry," notes his mother, Steffi, on a FaceTime call from Germany. "He always wanted to go fast."

Before little Kenny could walk, his father, Heiko, put him on the back of a quad that his sister, Michelle, used to ride around the family property in Apolda, Germany. Population 23,000, Apolda is in what used to be East Germany, where Heiko — everyone calls him Papa —grew up. Forbidden to leave the country, he found his own version of freedom on a two-stroke 250cc dirt bike, a vintage Suzuki that required you to mix the oil and gas. This was in the '70s, when Supercross was in its infancy, so most serious riders stuck to motocross (meaning they did laps on natural courses, not man-made tracks inside a stadium). Papa ripped around the local woods and raced at sanctioned events in the parks and forests within the strict borders of his homeland. He did a stint as a pro, and at a race in 1982 met Steffi. The two were friends for nearly a decade, during which time Steffi got married to another guy and had Michelle. In 1992, after Steffi divorced, she and Heiko became a couple. Kenny was born in '94, five years after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

At 2 and a half, before he could ride a bicycle, Kenny hopped on a 50cc Honda, a bike most kids don't ride till they're 7 or 8, but which Papa had modified to accommodate his son's height. By age 9 he was winning German motocross races in the 85cc category. Because he was born into motorsports, says Roczen, racing dirt bikes was inevitable. "My dad used to race. My sister used to race. So it was just a for-sure thing that I was going to do that." Soon he started winning European championships. He was partially sponsored by the age of 13, when he skipped the 125cc class and went straight to a 250, which in Germany meant he was racing against adults.

I'd fallen from so high in the air that something had to give.

Ken Roczen

Roczen loved to race, and loved to win, and he didn't mind seeing himself in magazines or on the internet. But the lifestyle was more demanding than many realized. "It was really tough," he says. "I missed a lot of school."

The nascent years of his racing life were taxing for other reasons, too. Papa, with his deep connection to motocross, was Ken's coach, trainer and dietitian, determined to make his son a champion. Consciously or otherwise, he groomed Ken to accomplish all that he had been forbidden or unable to do behind the Iron Curtain. Like many parent-coaches before him, Papa was rigorous, if not autocratic. You've heard the story. No excuses. Rest is a sign of weakness. Race to win or not at all. If 4-year-old Kenny took a spill and wanted help picking up his bike, Papa would shout from afar that he needed to do it himself. "Papa is a lovely human," says Courtney. "But he's from East Germany and his own father was very strict, so that's how he did things."

During racing season, Ken, Papa and Steffi traveled in a motor home, analyzing races together, sleeping and eating in the same tiny spaces. His parents'



commitment played a significant role in Roczen's work ethic from an early age — although you won't hear about this from Roczen himself. "He knew how much they'd given up for him," notes Courtney. "More than genetics, I think Ken's drive and need to win is built on his fear of disappointing his parents."



Ken has the ability to win

© Joe Pugliese

At home and on the road, Papa administered tough love while Steffi played the role of supportive yet deeply worried mom. She'd spent plenty of time on motorbikes and witnessed her share of wipeouts. But after seeing Michelle have a particularly ugly crash on a quad, she couldn't bear to see her kids ride. "Steffi just has a soft heart," Courtney says.

Steffi knew better than to try to dissuade Ken. "He was going to do what he wanted," she recalls. So she made the decision not to watch. At home, when Ken was spinning laps on the family property, his mom learned to take solace in the sound of the bike's engine the way most mothers find comfort in hearing their kid strumming "Stairway to Heaven" in the bedroom. Races, however, were torture. Steffi would walk Ken to the starting area, kiss him on the cheek and whisper a goofy but inspirational saying from *Dumb and Dumber* (they've

pinky- sworn never to share outside the family). Then she'd go to the RV, set a timer, turn on the radio and busy herself with chores until the race was over. "She was scared," Ken admits, his German accent still audible beneath the nasal, bro-sport inflections he's picked up in the States. To this day, he says, "I don't think she's ever watched me race —ever."



In the midst of a violent crash

© Feld Entertainment, Robert Hargraves

If human tissue gets too swollen, the heart, even a freakishly strong one like Roczen's, will eventually fail to pump enough blood to the wound. You know this condition, called compartment syndrome, is under way if the skin and muscle turns gray. It's the body's last warning: Fix this or amputate.

His forearm was wrecked. The two main bones (the radius and ulna) were snapped and jutting out of his skin. The radial head (the knobby part on the thumb side of the wrist) was sheared. His scaphoid (the bone between the base of the thumb and wrist) was shattered. His wrist and elbow were dislocated.

Ligaments were torn from bones.

At UC Irvine Medical Center, Roczen waited for surgery. The painkillers were useless. Fifteen hours passed. Before he could be taken into an operating room, Roczen, his agent, and Courtney decided to hop a private jet to Vail, Colorado, where rock-star orthopedic surgeon Randy Viola was waiting. Viola has worked on the hands and wrists of former Olympic ski racer Bode Miller and Miami



Dolphins quarterback Jay Cutler. To convey the severity of Roczen's injuries, Viola recalls some of the carnage he saw while training as a young doctor at Harborview Medical Center in Seattle. "I used to deal with people who'd been in industrial fishing and logging accidents," he says. "I'm talking about arms that had been mangled in machinery. Most pro athlete injuries aren't like that. They're more straightforward. But Ken's was as bad as it gets." Viola says Roczen's compartment syndrome was so severe, he was six hours shy of amputation. Looking at the x-rays, Viola's anesthesiologist turned to him and remarked: "You're not fixing this so he can ride. You're fixing this so he can eat dinner."

Roczen recalls that his concern going into surgery was having a functional arm, rather than no arm at all. Racing, or even riding, was not a priority. "I was like, 'I don't want to hear anything about dirt bikes.' " But Viola's recollection underscores Roczen's unyielding need to ride, and do it better than everyone else in the world. As the doc tells it: "Ken said to me, 'This thing doesn't have to be perfect. Just give me an elbow. Give me a wrist. If I can hold a handlebar, I can win.' "



Ready to get back out there



© Joe Pugliese

It's unlikely that Roczen misremembers his pre-surgery inner monologue. But whatever worries went through his head clearly aren't up for discussion. Papa did not train his son to express doubt or dwell on the uncertainty of the future. The guy has dirt bikes in his DNA. He's worked way too hard, for too long and with the support of too many, to consider the possibility of not racing — of disappointing his fans, his crew, his sponsors, his agent, his parents or himself. Hell, he wasn't even going to disappoint his doctor. Viola's office is lined with framed photos of elite athletes he's put back together. "I think seeing those pictures and being in Viola's care made Ken think, 'This is like being in God's hands, and it's a privilege to be here,'" Courtney says. "Ken wants to do right by everyone. That's why there was never a doubt in my mind that as long as his arm could be used, he'd keep racing."

Viola's priority was to restore the blood supply to Roczen's gray and dying muscles. He made a wrist-to-elbow incision along the meaty side of the forearm, allowing the tissue to balloon outside of the skin without constriction. ("It swelled up to the size of my thigh," Viola says.) Before he could put Roczen's arm back together, he had to clean the wound and the exposed bones. Viola reassembled the arm, but the swelling was still too severe to close the incision. Over the course of three weeks and six more surgeries, Viola drained the fluid, sterilized everything and sewed the skin back together, a little bit tighter each time, until the forearm returned to its normal size and could be left to scar. Another three surgeries followed a few months later, including a radial head replacement made possible by a donor. "Ninety-nine percent of specialists would have replaced it with a metal prosthesis right away," Viola says. "But this was a career-threatening injury. I knew if we did that, it was over for Ken." In early summer, a month after his last surgery and when he knew his arm would be somewhat functional, Roczen began to grow restless. While some athletes might use the healing process as a time for grieving, self-pity or to binge-watch *Better Call Saul*, Roczen refused to go there. "Not me," he admits. "I was just bored. I couldn't use the arm, I had nothing to do. I just had to get back out there."

It was that simple. Without a revelation or any ceremony, Roczen decided to race again.

Ken has the talent and ability to win a Supercross championship.  
retired racer Bob Moore

The thing is, none of this happened on account of Roczen being reckless. He wasn't trying to dazzle the crowd or push himself too far. "Ken has the talent and ability to win a Supercross championship," says Bob Moore, a retired racer who holds Motocross and Supercross titles. "But it's a dangerous sport. It's not a question of if, but when, you'll crash."

Roczen concurs. "It was a freak accident," says the racer, who's his own harshest critic. "It was nobody's fault."

This might sound absurd to an uneducated Supercross spectator, who'd likely observe that riding a 250-pound machine in a crowded pack at 60 miles per hour and intentionally launching that machine four stories into the air is nothing shy of a death wish. But risk is relative. Racing Supercross is only irresponsible if you don't know what you're doing, and Ken Roczen hardly got to the starting gate by dumb luck.

For all of his talent and drive and grit, for all of the hard lessons that Papa planted in Kenny's impressionable young mind, Roczen knows how to keep himself in check. "Ken is measured," says Roger De Coster, the 73-year-old Belgian ex-racer and five-time Motocross champion. "He's not a guy who hangs it out."

In order not to hang it out, to ride in a manner that's fast but controlled, ballsy but measured, you need exceptional bike-handling skills. But technique is only as optimal as a rider's body is fit. This fact can be lost on those unfamiliar with the sport, who often conflate dirt-bike racing with monster truck rallies, and can't see past the motorhead culture it engenders.

Still, putting all hyperbole aside, Supercross might be the most demanding sport in the world. Beneath their suits and chest protectors and helmets, riders maintain a near-anaerobic state for each 20-minute race, hearts pumping at 180 to 190 beats per minute. Picture yourself wind-sprinting two back-to-back 10Ks, while launching over a hundred hurdles and looking over your shoulders for 21 guys trying to box you out. Now imagine being so fit that you can relax and think straight while doing it. That's Supercross.

What's more, Roczen occupies an echelon of fitness that few pros, in any sport, will ever sniff. Where other riders start to lag, Roczen remains powerful but loose. His endurance and strength and finesse are obvious on the practice track, as The Red Bulletin witnessed during a late-December session in Corona, California. "Ken is one of the greatest athletes I've trained — definitely one of the top three," says Peter Park, who's been training elite athletes since the early '90s and has been working with Roczen for the last three years. The other two? Lance Armstrong, who Park trained for seven years, and Giancarlo Stanton, the New York Yankees right fielder and genetic beast known for 600-foot home runs.

Roczen is something of a genetic marvel, too. Five feet 10 inches tall and 157 pounds, his body fat is four percent. He has a standing vertical jump of 40 inches — on one leg. "Ken was that way when I got him," Park says. "As I like to say, 'You can't turn a donkey into a racehorse.'"

It's reasonable to argue that Papa's unrelenting pressure created the thoroughbred. At a certain point, though, the nature-nurture question becomes moot. The athlete evolves into his own person and it no longer matters how he got there. What matters is winning. And sometimes that requires drastic measures. By 2013, now based in the US and three years into a Supercross career under Papa's guidance, Roczen could feel that something wasn't right.

The dynamic between him and his father was changing. He was growing up, seeing the world, living on his own. He just had a feeling. Like the fall from 40 feet that would one day demolish his wrist, something had to give. At the end of that racing season, Roczen, only 19, cut ties with Papa.







Instagram photo of his arm

© Courtesy of Ken Roczen

As with all personal topics that might blur his athlete's ability to focus, Roczen doesn't offer insight into the split with his old man. His only public display of vulnerability on this matter happened in 2014, when, with an undercurrent of regret in his voice, he told Fox Sports that Papa "felt kind of pushed out." But, he added, "Something was just missing. I can't really tell you what it was, but something wasn't right and I just felt like I needed new motivation."

He found that driving force in Aldon Baker, a renowned trainer who'd worked with multi-time Supercross champs like Ricky Carmichael, James Stewart, Ryan Villopoto and Dungey. Never afraid of commitment, Roczen moved to Florida to be near Baker after his final year riding 250s. Despite a big crash, he'd had a respectable run. "Overall it was a pretty solid season," he says. "I was there. I was always fast. But then I went to train with Aldon, and that changed everything."

Working with Baker, Roczen won the 2014 pro Motocross Championship. But the partnership hit a wall. "Aldon is very old school," Roczen says. "He pushed my body too hard, which is kind of wrong." Any parallels between Baker and Papa are lost on Roczen or not up for discussion.

In late 2015, Roczen decided to end the relationship and work with Park, who's based in Southern California. Ken and Courtney decamped there between the start of "boot camp" season, in November, and the end of racing season, in May, staying at VRBOs and living out of storage units. In Park, Roczen had found the guidance he needed, someone who would hold him accountable and push him hard, but not to the breaking point. Roczen relearned basic movements and body mechanics, transforming how he moved and accessing core strength he didn't know he possessed. "I had to learn how to lift right, squat right, deadlift right, all that stuff," he says. Whatever he and Park had going, it worked. In 2016, Roczen had his best season yet, winning seven Supercross events.

When he sat down for an interview just before the 2018 season, he'd only been back on the bike for a few months (he wore a wrist brace) and was still unable to extend his elbow. Anyone following him on Instagram or Facebook knew this didn't bother him one bit. For months, he'd been posting pictures from his surgeries and speaking matter-of-factly about his comeback. "My training camp throughout the winter has been super good," he says, licking yolk from his knife. "I'm actually doing push-ups on the arm, just on my fist, and I can pretty much fully load it." Without skipping a beat, he adds, "So it's game on, you know?"

Some are good athletes or good riders, but only a few want to be stars.

veteran motorsport commentator Jason Weigandt

Back in the early '70s, when American rider Mickey Thompson was the face of pro motocross, a concert promoter named Mike Goodwin had a stroke of genius: Bring dirt-bike racing into stadiums and turn the events into Super Bowl-caliber spectacles. Nearly five decades later (and three decades after Goodwin was convicted for murdering Thompson), Supercross is on the verge of attracting a million live fans in a season.

To understand the magnitude of Supercross as a sport and a subculture and a phenomenon — to truly comprehend the beery, clamorous and distinctly American conspicuousness of the event — you need to hop on the 5 or the 91 or the 710 freeways to Angel Stadium. Here, after you jockey for parking, you can join the crowd ambling into Anaheim 1, the season opener.

This is where it all goes down. Not just fandom bordering on worship but insider gossip and deals-in-the-works and bro hugs between industry pals. A1, particularly in the pit in the hours leading up to the Main Event, is where you catch a few minutes with ex-racers like Bob Moore or elder statesman Roger De Coster or trade-magazine reporters who take the sport as seriously as DC journalists take RussiaGate. It's also where you go to be reminded that the only story at 2018's A1 is Ken Roczen. "Everyone wants to see Number 94," Moore says, in between chitchat and handshakes with fans and old friends. "I've been walking around back here for four hours, and out in the stadium watching the practice runs and qualifiers, and that's all I keep hearing."





## Roczen at A1 in Anaheim

© Garth Milan/Red Bull Content Pool

Over by the Honda tent, where Ken and Courtney are catching some quiet time in their RV, Weigandt put Roczen's comeback into perspective. "The sport really needs some superstars right now," he says. "By that I mean guys who want to be stars. Some are good athletes or good riders, but only a few want to be stars."

He notes that Roczen was happy to embrace the narrative by way of social media. "Supercross is in a state of transition," Weigandt says. Two-time champ Chad Reed is still out here, but at 35 is essentially geriatric. Repeat champions Dungey and Villipoto have retired, and Stewart, who holds one title, walked away from racing in 2016 without explanation. "That's four guys who have retired or disappeared or are no longer as good as they were," he says. "That's a huge void."

The same sentiment runs through every tier and aisle and concession-stand line inside the stadium in the run-up to the Main Event, albeit with less eloquence than Weigandt's overture. The 25-ish dude buying three 24-ounce IPAs near the nosebleeds? "Roczen!" The prepubescent boys sporting Team Honda hats and shirts? "Roczen!" The dad taking a vape break in the smoking area with his grade-school-age daughter by his side? Well, he isn't the shouting type.

The opening ceremony to the Main Event is a main event in itself, ancient Rome with four-stroke engines, a spectacle so surreal that aliens viewing it from a spaceship would hightail it to whatever universe they came from. First, a video plays on the jumbotron, with highlights and family bloopers and whatever else each racer chooses to include. Then comes the basso profundo of the announcer, nine octaves deeper than his counterparts in any other sport, followed by a rider's personal theme song, which is usually heavy on guitar riffs. For Roczen, that tune is "Bro Hymn," by the 1990s quasi-punk band Pennywise. As the chords blast from the PA, a kaleidoscopic fireworks storm erupts near the starting gate, and Roczen rolls out, slow enough to wave to the crowd while taking a lap and catching some air. The crowd goes bananas.

The miracle they'd hoped for doesn't materialize. Thirty minutes after the race begins, the crowd at Angel Stadium walks herd-like out of the venue, where Roczen, having lurked in the middle of the pack for most of the race, finished in fourth place.





Roczen with his bulldog, Rio

© Joe Pugliese

Going into the 2018 season, Roczen had expressed that merely lining up would be a win in itself. Which makes his finish at A1 all the more remarkable: Less than a year after suffering a potentially unfixable injury, the Supercross legend nearly made the podium at his return to the highest level of his sport. But Roczen, who has been hardwired to compete and above all win, was probably not satisfied.

Two weeks later, after taking second in Houston, Roczen finds himself back in Angel Stadium for A2 on the one-year anniversary of the race that nearly took his left arm. To commemorate the event, to acknowledge the stakes and to let his fans and his crew and his family know that he planned to do right by them, he sports the same yellow uniform he wore when he crashed. Roczen finishes in ninth place at the end of the night.

For all of his willingness to talk about the crash up until A2 — the interviews, the Instagram posts — within a few days he lets everyone know that the wreck can no longer be part of his story. During an interview with the podcast PulpMX, Roczen explains his thinking, in his signature minimalist style. “I don’t mind talking about it once. I don’t mind talking about it 15 times. I get it. It’s a story.” But now, he says, “Anaheim 2 is done. That was the race and that was the limit.”

The message is clear: While he’d achieved moral victories and maintained the appreciation and admiration of his fans, Roczen needs to hunker down and grind out the rest of his comeback.

To make sure that everyone knows he’s serious about putting the injury behind him and getting on with the business of winning, he makes one final, unexpected, unspoken statement. At the fourth event of the season, in Glendale, Arizona, Roczen mounts his bike to prepare for the opening-ceremony lap. But as his highlight video appears on the Jumbotron, there’s no footage of the crash. Roczen told officials to remove it. On this January night, all the crowd sees on the big screen is Number 94, flying through the air and sticking the landing.





Convinced of his comeback

© Joe Pugliese

Two weeks later, in San Diego, Roczen heads into an early turn and attempts to throw some attitude back at Cooper Webb, who checked him one turn earlier. It doesn't go well. Both riders go down, and Roczen's right arm — his good one — gets stuck in between the swing arm and spinning rear wheel of Webb's Yamaha.

A bone in his right hand is broken. Now Roczen must make yet another accident public, and announce yet another comeback. "Just want to forget about this weekend," he writes on Instagram, summarizing the previous week — and the previous year. "Surgery on Friday on my hand. Will give an update as soon as i get a CT scan. Might be able to be back pretty quick. Will know more soon."

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