

LIVING TO TELL THE TALE

Kiwi superbiker Aaron Clark, in his first interview, tells Sports News Writer of the Year **Dylan Cleaver** about the accident that should have killed him.

GIVEN THAT you cannot ask a dead man whether they should be alive, the converse should be equally redundant.

Nevertheless, you can't help but ask superbike racer Aaron Clark: "Shouldn't you be dead?"

He replies with a shrug of his shoulders, a simple act that two months ago would have been impossible, and this: "I know I've been given a second chance."

Crash dynamics is no exact science, but Clark knows as well as anybody the chance of getting up after hitting a concrete wall at 200km/h is not great.

If two of his racing fraternity, Josh Graham and Glenn Conser, had not immediately arrived at the scene and started administering CPR, it would have been infinitesimal.

Clark has no memory from the four weeks after the crash at Pikes Peak Raceway in the United States last October 10, but Conser provides a chilling insight into the immediate aftermath.

He heard Clark and his 1000cc Suzuki GSXR hit the wall and turned to see him sliding down the track.

"I rode to the scene. I opened Aaron's visor and saw that his eyes were open and blank," Conser says.

"I unzipped his leathers and put my hand on his chest and felt no breathing; I checked for a pulse and felt none."

The thought that Clark was dead put Conser "in a bit of shock". Graham's arrival and "very matter-of-fact statement" that the pair needed to start CPR brought him round.

"Josh held and stabilised Aaron's head and neck while I started CPR."

"Aaron regained a pulse and began taking some very ragged breaths right about the time the ambulance arrived on scene, at which point we obviously let the medics take over while we assisted."

With no helicopter available, the medics continued to work on Clark until an ambulance arrived about 10 minutes later.

"When Aaron was put into the transport ambulance he had a pulse and was breathing, though not very well."

It was about then that his family back in New Zealand — Clark has lived and raced in the US for nine years and has an American wife, Tedi — started getting calls.

Parents John and Raye, from Northland, and sister Megan were on the first flight to Colorado Springs.

Although Clark has an impressive catalogue of scrapes, from his days on a dirtbike to the high-speed world of superbikes, this crash shocked his colleagues.

"I don't crash, so I think everybody

AARON CLARK

- Has been riding motocross since primary school in Northland.
- Has won numerous club and regional motocross and supercross championships.
- Made the transition to road racing in 1998.
- In 1999, he received the wildcard entry in the FIM Australian Grand Prix and finished 3rd in the Australian 250 GP Roadracing Championship.
- In 2000 he won the Aprilia Cup National Championship in the US.
- In 2001 Aaron received a sponsored ride from Aprilia USA in Unlimited Superbike FUSA.
- 2007 and 2008 Masters of the Mountain Series (Utah) champion.
- 2007 Motorcycle Roadracing Association (Colorado) champion.
- Was leading MRA championship in 2008 when he crashed during practice for the final round at Pikes Peak.

was surprised," he says haltingly, the result of damage to the nerves in his vocal chords which are only now starting to come right.

"Where I crashed, I had been round that corner before in the same spot. I was not offline. They think I might have run something over. It happens."

Ever since Peter O'Toole (*Lawrence of Arabia*) went fatally flying over the handlebars of his Brough Superior SS100, motorcycling, and in particular motorcycle racing, has been seen as a

dangerous pursuit.

There have been more than 300 recorded deaths in motorcycle racing — more than 200 alone at the Isle of Man TT Races — and victims have included prominent New Zealand riders Kim Newcombe and Robert Holden.

But impending death is the elephant in leathers that no racer sees.

"I guess you know it could happen, but to somebody else, never you," Clark says.

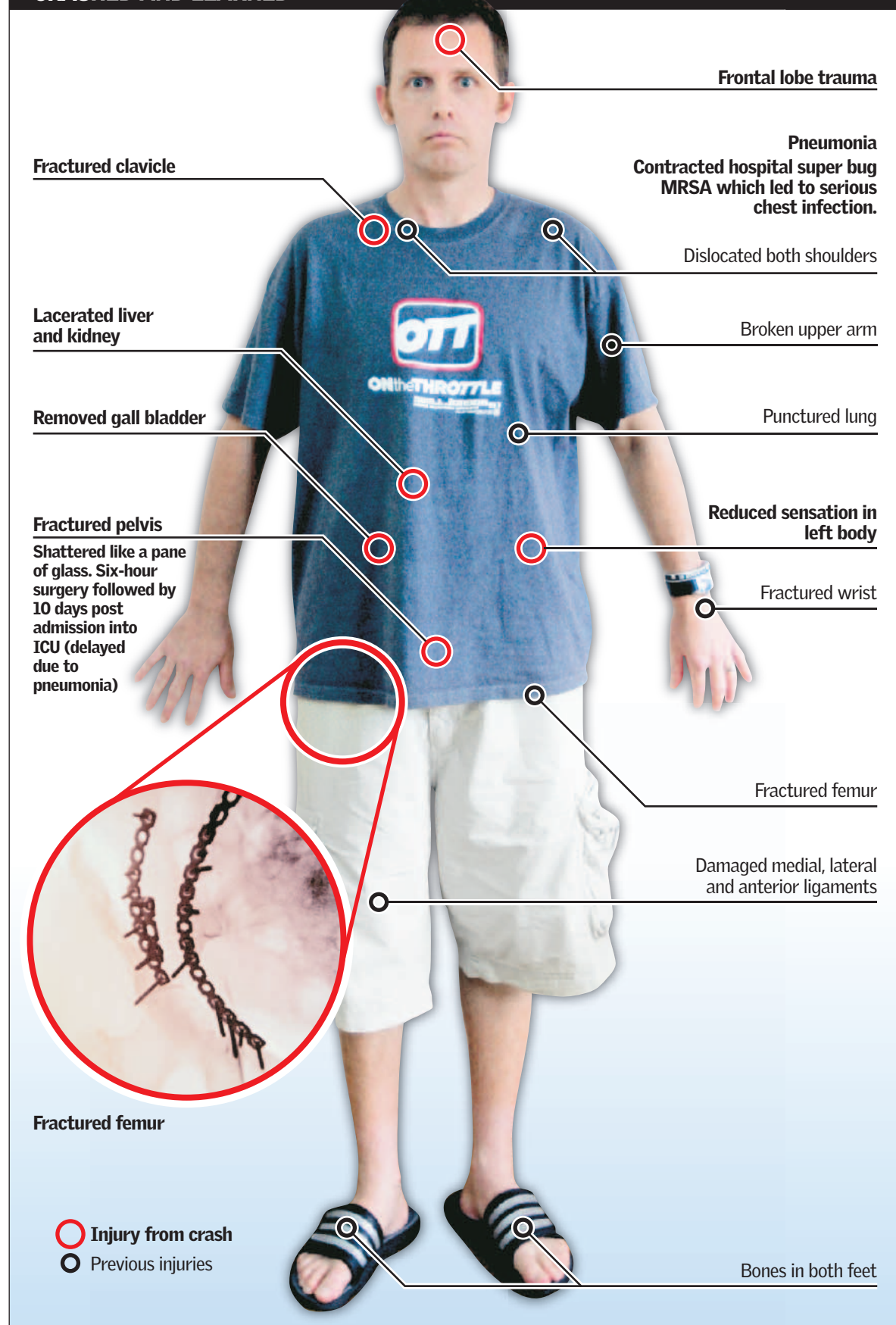
"Unfortunately, because you crash and you normally get up and walk away, you almost feel like you're a superhero," Clark says. "You think you are bulletproof — that nothing can go wrong."

Although Clark wants to get back on a bike, he will never race again.

His connection to the sport will remain as a mechanic, but he'll always carry a reminder of his racing days.

After his crash he was left with a pelvis that smashed like a pane of glass and required a six-hour operation to

CRASHED AND LEARNED



PURE SPEED: Aaron Clark in action on his superbike. He has made a remarkable recovery after his crash.



RECOVERING: Clark on his hospital bed hitched up to life-saving machines. DOUG SHERRING

insert so many plates and screws he will never walk beep-free through an airport scanner again. The ball-and-socket joint at the top of his right leg was badly damaged, his clavicle broke, his kidney and liver received lacerations and he subsequently had his gall bladder removed.

In hospital he contracted pneumonia and a MRSA superbug that delayed surgery on his pelvis for six days. Then there was the small matter of frontal lobe trauma that his family feared would permanently affect him.

In many ways the recovery has been as much a miracle as the initial survival.

Exorbitant medical costs in the US meant they needed to get Clark back to New Zealand. When Air New Zealand heard one of their former employees — Clark was an aircraft engineer — was in strife, they donated \$10,000 to fly him home.

By rights Clark should still be using a Zimmer frame-type device to get around but that sits idly by his bed and his walking cane is now largely unemployed.

When the *Herald on Sunday* caught up with him at Auckland's Rehab Plus he was talkative and mobile.

The weeks in hospital being fed through tubes have stripped 17kg of

flesh from his bones but sapped none of his spirit. He talks of walking without a limp soon, of his speech returning to normal, of his strength returning to his right arm, of the weight returning.

Hell, he never needed that gall bladder anyway.

But there is one change he's keen to keep. Whether it was the blow to the frontal lobes or the time he's had to think, his philosophy on life, even his personality, has changed.

"It has. I used to take my friends and family for granted. You just do. It's life. Now I value those friendships a lot more."