

Legends of Motorcycling

Remembering Will Davis

COLE DAVIS HONORS a legacy that he may never fully understand every time he steps into the pits at an AMA Pro Flat Track event.

All of 17 years old, the North Carolina youngster isn't a professional racer, yet he is treated with respect by the competitors and embraced with the warmth of a close family member in one of professional motor racing's most tight-knit fraternities, the AMA Grand National Championship. You see, Cole Davis is a reminder of one of the sport's most beloved competitors, his father, AMA Grand National number 21 Will Davis, who once walked those same pits and raced those same tracks. And that's about all the credibility Cole needs among the series regulars. He isn't cocky about it, but he has every right to be proud of a father that he struggles to remember.

"I don't really remember his racing that much," Cole says. "I just remember him from around the house and from when he helped me start riding my own motorcycles. I remember that he didn't want me to follow in his footsteps and race motorcycles. He thought it was too dangerous."

Cole was just 7 years old when Will perished in a fourth-turn accident during the opening lap of the Sedalia, Missouri, Grand National Half Mile on August 25, 2001. Just 36 years old, Will was in the prime of his life and his racing career, having just won back-to-back Grand National Half-Miles that rank among his most memorable performances.

Rhonda Davis has kept an extra watchful eye on her son as he has grown. Proud of him as any mother would be, she has enjoyed watching him turn into a fine young man, displaying many of the positive character traits that endeared people to his father. And of these, there's one that understandably causes her just a little worry. Cole loves to ride motorcycles.

"He has the passion," Rhonda says of Cole. "I can see it, and it's bittersweet to me. I go with him to Brewers Speedway over in Wilson, which William raced at when we were 16 and had just started dating. Cole has a 450, and he rides both of the 600s that William had. It's just for fun, but you can see it in his face."

Oh, sure. It's the same face that Will had when Rhonda met him as a teenager. By then, Will was on his way to becoming a professional motorcycle racer, and a darned good one, despite being blind in his right eye, which always twitched, earning him the name, "Winkin' Will." From the earliest moments in his pro career, he gained the respect of some of the series top racers, including men like nine-time AMA Grand National Champion Scott Parker, (then) three-time Chris Carr and long-time privateer racer Steve Morehead. He became good friends with all of them, just as he did with everyone on the circuit, and he absorbed whatever track craft they offered. Morehead, a flat track racing legend who retired in the 1990s and went on to become the AMA's Dirt Track Operations Manager, played a substantial role in Will's professional development curve.

"Will's passion for the sport was above and beyond that of anyone who has come down the road in a very long time,"

Morehead says. "He didn't have natural ability like a Scott Parker or a Jay Springsteen. He had to massage his talent, but he had a great work ethic, and that's what I admired about him and why I didn't mind helping him. He would drive up from North Carolina and run the regional races we had in Ohio to hone his skills. One of the proudest moments of my life is the day that I loaned him my motorcycle for the Lima Half Mile and saw him win his first Grand National main event (in 1989)."

Will's career turned another corner in 1992 when he joined forces with the A&R Racing team of Louie Aruta and Craig Rogers. Aboard immaculately prepared Honda RS750s tuned by Dennis Towne, Davis began to make a real name for himself.

"I remember how that started," Rogers recalls. "I had just parted ways with my rider, Danny Ingram, and I was going down to (partner) Louie Aruta's shop one day. I pulled up, and there was

Will with Dennis Towne, sitting on one of my Honda RS750s. I looked at Louie and said, 'What's he doing here?' And Louie said, 'I don't know, but he's been sitting on that thing for an hour.' We talked at Sacramento later, and then we went to the year-end AMA party at Lake Tahoe and struck a deal in about 10 minutes. The rest is history."

The Rogers and Davis clans became tight. The bond remained even after Will left the team at the end of the 1995 season, and it remains to this day.

"We did vacations together, all kinds of crap," Rogers says. "His son, Cole, is like my son now. We spend a lot of time together. In fact, I just had Cole with me at the Springfield Mile over Memorial Day Weekend, and my wife and Rhonda probably talk on the phone three times a day. Will was just that special

of a person to us. Even after 10 years, I still miss him a lot every day."

No one would have blamed Rhonda if she had abandoned the flat track family after Will's accident, but she never has. A registered nurse by trade, Rhonda was all too familiar with the dangers of racing motorcycles side-by-side at over 140 mph before Will's accident, and she had mourned whenever other competitors—too many—were lost. But in flat track racing there exists an unbreakable strength borne out of the never-ending passion and struggle within the sport. That passion burned brightly in Will. It was his reason for existence, and he shared it with anyone he met. He even used it to make a difference in lives of people struggling away from the racetrack by joining the Racing For Kids charity and taking the time to visit terminally ill children in hospitals whenever he was on the road. Those who knew him have never forgotten how big Will's heart was. Allowing Cole to spend time with people who were part of Will's professional life has been therapeutic.

"It means a lot to us, especially to Cole," Rhonda says. "It means a lot to him that his dad's memory hangs on and that everyone thought so much of William."

Carr and Parker are two men who Will pursued relentlessly, and both remember him as a competitor and friend. Carr, who will retire in 2011 after an illustrious 25-year career that includes several AMA Championships, says that he still thinks of Will often.

SCOTT ROUSSEAU



Flat tracker Will Davis was at the top of his game when he was tragically killed in an accident at the Sedalia Grand National Half Mile on August 25, 2001.

“Every time we show up to a wet, sticky clay track, I always think to myself, ‘Man, Will would dig this place,’” Carr says. “We spent a lot of time together away from the racetrack, too. Will was always a guest instructor on the East Coast when we’d do the Danny Walker American Supercamps, and he was my gambling buddy on the golf course. Every time I play golf, I always wish he was there so that we could get some crazy bet going. Even 10 years later, his memory is fresh in my mind. We really miss him.”

Parker could cite numerous battles with Will on the racetrack, but he instead remembers a humorous off-track incident the two shared during a golf outing when the series visited Rapid City, South Dakota, during the Sturgis Rally.

“Will liked to golf, and we played together a lot,” Parker recalls. “I remember one time we were playing golf in Sturgis during the rally there, and these tough-looking guys were riding Harleys out on the road by our tee box. The lead guy flipped us off, so I flipped him off. Then they turned around, pulled over, got off their bikes, came over the fence and started walking toward us. Will and I just looked at each other and grabbed our drivers out of our golf bags because we didn’t know what was going to happen, and I figured we were going to have to beat the crap out of someone. It turns out the guy was (three-time World Road Racing Champion) Kenny Roberts. He knew it was us, but we didn’t know it was him, and we thought we were going to end up in a fight. Will and I always laughed about that later. As far as racing goes, he was a real hard charger who was great on clay half-mile tracks and just got more diversified as time went by.”

Cole exhibits his own diversity, and Rhonda has no doubts as to where it came from.

“He is the spitting image of William, even the way he rides,” Rhonda says. “The way he puts his helmet on, the way he sits on the motorcycle... It’s really scary. He’s very competitive, and he loves to win. But he has so many other things going on. He’s been a straight-A student his entire life, he’s going to be the president of his student body next year and he loves to play baseball.”

Will loved baseball, and he loved playing second base in his church softball league. Who would’ve ever thought it would nearly end his racing career in 2000? He had been instrumental in bringing the first Grand National to Charlotte, and he desperately wanted to win it, but just days before the race, he collided head to head with another player while attempting to catch a pop fly during a church softball game. Will suffered a temporal skull fracture and a ruptured eardrum, ending any hope of winning the inaugural Charlotte Half Mile.

Redemption came a year later in front of 7000 screaming fans, and it wasn’t easy. Chasing down a dream, Will used a low line to snatch the lead away from dirt track legend Jay Springsteen on lap nine of the 25-lap Grand National feature and then fended off a relentless attack from a hot-riding Kenny Coolbeth in the last five laps, crossing the finish line mere inches ahead of him.

“That accident was just meant to be,” Will said that night. “And now this (win) was meant to be. It couldn’t have been any better with the finish that close. It’s just unreal.”

“That was his most memorable win,” Rhonda recalls. “It was so hard on him when he had that softball accident and couldn’t race Charlotte that first year. So for him to win it in front of all our

family and friends was very special. I can remember him telling me that we were going to stay there and sign autographs until the sun came up, if that’s what we had to do. He was just so happy. He was on the best roll of his life. He had won Charlotte, and then he came right back and won Harrington, Delaware. The last three weeks of his life were really good.”

Indeed, Will put in perhaps the most perfect performance of his career at the Harrington, Delaware, Half Mile on August 4, 2001, his final National win. He wasn’t defeated all night. He won his scratch heat, set fast time in his regular heat race and absolutely dominated the feature by nabbing the holeshot and flat driving away from Chris Carr and the rest of the field. His lead over Carr was nearly half a straightaway when he crossed the finish line.

“I can’t be any happier, especially the way that things have been going lately,” Will said after the race. “This is what it’s all about. I’m speechless, really. This is the first pea-gravel track that I’ve won on since Lima in ‘89. I got a first-place trophy here during the rainout in ‘96, but that doesn’t count. That was a brand-new motorcycle we rode tonight. That’s the first National that I’ve won on it. Chris showed me a wheel early, and I thought I was going to be in a race, but then the next lap, I looked back, and I had 10 bike lengths on him.”

Will was the hottest rider on the circuit when the AMA series stopped for yet another Saturday night half mile at Sedalia, Missouri, on August 25, 2001. It was a fast clay half-mile track that he knew well, as he had scored three of his 31 career AMA Grand National wins there. By most accounts, it was shaping up to be another good night for Will. But things do

happen for a reason, even those that are hard to accept today.

“Our family misses him every day,” Rhonda says. “Life goes on, and you try to make the best of things. We’ve had our struggles when it comes to trying to move on, but we are really blessed.”

Ten years later, Will Davis still ranks seventh on the AMA Grand National Championship winner’s list. More importantly, his memory lives on through Rhonda, Cole and all those who had the good fortune of knowing him.

“You can put him right up there with Scott Parker, Jay Springsteen and Chris Carr in my book,” Morehead says. “Would Will have been a Grand National Champion if he were still here? Absolutely. He was just very enjoyable to be around. I have his picture hanging right in front of me in the wall of my office, so I still see him every day.”

Cole has given some thought to racing, but he knows there are other places in life where his drive and intellect would be better served. His grades have presented him with opportunities to attend just about any college he chooses.

“Hopefully, I can get into a good college and do some other things down the road,” he says.

And that’s just fine, too, because whenever Cole steps into the pits at an AMA Grand National, he’ll always be shown the same respect that Will was. And just like Will, he’ll never need a number one plate on his motorcycle to be treated like a champion.

“Pretty much everywhere I go, people just want to talk to me about how my dad was involved in their lives, and they want to tell me how he touched their lives in some way,” Cole says. “That makes me feel good.”

—Scott Rousseau



Good Times: Rhonda and Will Davis celebrate Will's Las Vegas Half Mile win, October 1, 1999.