

# What Goes Up

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By Lane DeGregory

The old daredevil tips back in his recliner, nursing a blue lollipop. His small white dog, Rocket, slumbers in his lap.

On the Food Network, a chef is shouting. Evel Knievel grabs the remote, fumbles with the buttons. “Blasted thing,” he growls. “I can’t turn it down.” He slams the clicker on the table beside him. Buries his face in his hands.

“I spend my days right here, mostly,” he says, without lifting his head. It’s been three weeks since his second stroke. He is always tired, sometimes addled. Knievel is 68 but has the body of—well, of a man held together with pins and plates.

“I used to go all over the world,” he grumbles. “I used to travel eight months a year. Now I can’t even drive.”

He takes 11 pills in the morning, a dozen at night. They keep his blood flowing and his transplanted liver working. They ease the arthritis that burns his back, arms and legs. It hurts like hell, being mortal.

It’s a hot morning in July. In two weeks he is supposed to fly to his hometown of Butte, Mont., for the annual festival in his honor: Evel Knievel Days. He’ll wave from the passenger seat of a pickup, sign some autographs, try to impersonate the man he used to be.

“This is my last performance,” he says. “If I make it.”

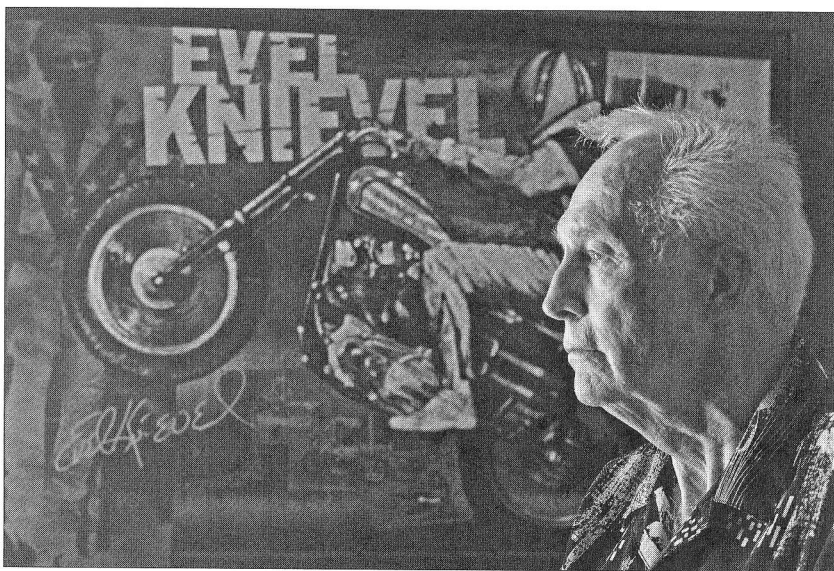
*If I make it.* How many times do you think Evel Knievel has said those words?

Usually he did make it, piloting his motorcycle over cars, snakes, sharks, buses. But we remember him just as well for the times his cycle came up just a teensy bit short. Knievel scattered pieces of himself at Caesars Palace, in Wembley Stadium, in San Francisco’s Cow Palace.

He was the first Jackass.

His aim was uncertain, but his timing was exquisite. In the mid-1970s, America was booing its returning soldiers and booting its president. In vroomed Knievel, wearing a red, white and blue leather jumpsuit, a hero’s cape and a showoff’s thick gold chains.

“Evel was the king of bling,” his friend Bill Rundle says. “And they didn’t even know what bling was back then.”



A painting of Evel Knievel in his daredevil heyday hangs in his Clearwater condo. That Knievel is long gone. Today, at age 68, he is ailing. He has had two strokes and a liver transplant, and still reels from the injuries he incurred during his career. "He was such an icon," friend Bill Rundle says. "You don't believe icons can get old." (Photograph courtesy of Melissa Lyttle/St. Petersburg Times)

He gave Americans someone to cheer for, or at least provided a welcome distraction. Twelve days after Richard Nixon resigned, Knievel jumped 13 Mack trucks. On Oct. 25, 1975, more than half the country watched him leap over 14 Greyhound buses in Ohio—more than watched the "Thrilla in Manila" fight between Joe Frazier and Muhammad Ali. Knievel had money, fame and—he doesn't mind telling you—"oh God, more than 1,000 women."

And now here he is, struggling just to breathe. White wisps are all that's left of the thick hair that once spilled from his helmet. After weeks in the hospital, his golf course tan has paled. Gone are the gold chains, the diamond pinky ring, that swagger.

If life delivered neat endings, Evel Knievel would have gone out in a flash of glory, at the far end of a row of buses, or maybe in the bottom of the Snake River Canyon, which he famously failed to clear in 1974. Instead, after two marriages, four kids, a liver transplant, lung disease and a couple of strokes, the old daredevil sees this year's annual Evel Knievel Days as his ending. It will have to do.

"He was such an icon," Rundle says. "You don't believe icons can get old."

His wife, Krystal, 38, calls him by his given name, Bob.

They live with two spoiled Maltese in a modest Clearwater condo. You have to punch in a code to get through the lobby. The name above their code is an alias. When it said Knievel, drunks kept coming by late at night, buzzing their number.

An oil painting of Evel dominates his front hallway. A bronze statue of him stands on a bookshelf, surrounded by photos of his 11 grandkids.

The dog is snoring in Knievel's lap. Another chef is yelling on TV. Evel turns to a visitor and says, "Why don't you get up and get yourself a beer?"

It's 11 a.m. The visitor declines, thanks him. Knievel barks, "Then why don't you go get me one?"

"Christ almighty," he grouses when he finally gets his Michelob Ultra. He takes a swig.

"Forgive me," he says, "for using the Lord's name in vain."

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"Okay, ask your questions. Hurry up. I don't have all day."

He doesn't want to waste whatever time he has left repeating things everyone already knows. For God's sake, people have written books about him. George Hamilton played him in a movie. The Bionic Woman wrapped her arms around his waist on an episode of her show.

He is tired of people pestering him, asking stupid questions.

What kind of questions? "That's a dumb question."

What was your favorite jump? "Jesus. Any jump I landed was my favorite."

What does it feel like to crash? "What the hell do you think it feels like? Christ almighty. It hurts."

Why did you do what you did? "Because I could. I could do the impossible. And it sure beat selling insurance."

Was it worth it? "What kind of stupid question is that? I'm still here, aren't I?"

"Now hurry up. I'm running out of air."

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From the time he could pedal a bike, Robert Craig Knievel wanted to fly.

He was born in 1938, in the desolate mining town of Butte. His parents divorced before he was 2 and left him and his younger brother to be raised by grandparents. "Bobby" was 8 when he got his first wheels. He taught himself to ride, then jump. By 12, he'd totaled four bikes and moved on to

motorcycles. Everyone around Butte knew Bobby. He'd race through flower beds, leap curbs, pop wheelies through parking lots.

He wanted to be as flashy as Liberace, as brave as Roy Rogers, as beloved as Elvis. The legend goes that when he got tossed in jail for—what else?—reckless driving, a judge nicknamed him Evil Knievel. Later, Evel changed the spelling so he wouldn't seem so bad.

He worked as a hunting guide, then sold insurance and Hondas. If you beat him at arm wrestling, you won a free motorcycle. Some say he scammed people with a security guard business.

"A lot of Butte people really resent him to this day," says Mike Byrnes, who went to school with Knievel and now runs Butte Tours. "He's the most famous guy to come out of Butte. But we don't have any Evel sites on our tours.

"We've got a T-shirt, though. 'Butte, Montana: Birthplace of Evel Knievel. We apologize.'"

Knievel was 27, married and a father, when he set out to become a professional daredevil. He did everything: built the ramps, booked the venues, promoted the show. Pay him \$500 and he'd jump two cars.

Then sponsors began upping the ante. Think you can jump six cars? We'll give you \$1,500. Try seven—we'll make it \$2,000.

Soon Knievel was coming up with his own stunts. How much would you pay me to jump buses? Sharks? The Grand Canyon?

"He always figured he'd at least try," says Rundle, who traveled with Knievel's entourage.

"This one time at the Cow Palace, he knew his bike wasn't getting up enough speed to make the jump. But Evel would never back down. He jumped anyway. That one broke him up pretty good."

Rundle was with Knievel in 1974 when the federal government said he couldn't jump the Grand Canyon. So Knievel had to settle for the Snake River Canyon. Promoters promised him \$6 million.

For a week before the jump, ABC showed specials on how the stunt could go wrong, why the "Skycycle"—more rocket ship than motorcycle—wouldn't make it.

"They kept going over all the ways he could die," Rundle says. "And I don't think Evel thought he'd make it, either. But you know he'd just sit there watching all the reports and he never said anything to anyone. He never seemed to react. It was eerie."

Knievel needs oxygen. He lifts the dog from his lap, heaves himself out of the recliner.

He shuffles across his living room in white socks, past the Evel Knievel light-switch plate in his bedroom hall, past the photo of his second wedding, at Caesars Palace, where he once crashed so badly he spent a month in a coma.

Knievel opens his closet and pulls out the tubes that tether him to a tank. He flips on the machine, drinks in the air.

On the way back to the living room, he passes a table piled high with fan mail. A guy from St. Paul, Minn., sent an old photo of Evel leaping in front of a Ferris wheel. "I'm just wondering how you're doing," the man wrote. "You're extremely brave. I respect you." Knievel answers every inquiry—as long as he gets a self-addressed envelope, with postage.

"I never thought the empire would last this long," he says, easing back into his chair. He closes his eyes. The shadow of a smile seems to tug at his mouth.

Then he looks up, confused. "What year is it again?"

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In the winter of 1976, Knievel wiped out after jumping a tank of live sharks, crushing both arms and his collarbone and suffering a severe concussion. He also smashed into a cameraman, who eventually lost an eye.

He did a few exhibitions after that—some with his son Robbie, now a grownup daredevil—then quit. He spent his time on golf courses and in casinos, gambling on everything, sometimes \$100,000 on a football game.

Years later, after the IRS took some of his homes, Knievel cruised the highways in his custom RV, visiting car dealerships and Harley shops, towing a trailer filled with his past: the rocket he'd ridden into the canyon, five motorcycles, a skeleton illustrating the 35 bones he'd shattered. His appearances helped sell cars, put money in his pocket.

Then came liver disease and the strokes. Knievel can't go on the road anymore. He still does a few endorsements: Mini Coopers, a slot machine, a line of custom motorcycles. Last year, Evel toys were re-released. Even so, money is tight now; Knievel is trying to sell his custom RV.

These days, he says, he doesn't need an adrenaline rush. "The most joy I get now is waking up and wrapping my arms around my wife," he says. "But sometimes she sleeps way over on the other side of the bed and it's hard to get to her. Especially with the dogs between us."

More and more, he thinks about the life after this one. He says he knows God has a place for him. "My grandmother who raised me, she lived to 103, she'll be there waiting for me. And I hope she'll forgive me for all I put her through," Knievel says.

"She'll point her finger at me and say, 'I told you so, Bobby. I told you everything you wanted to do in life, you could. You can fall many times, but as long as you keep getting up, you'll never be a failure.'"

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Evel Knievel needs a nap.

It's a couple of hours into the interview and he's talking about a stunt he never got to do. He wanted to jump out of a plane without a parachute and land in a haystack.

"They never let me do it," he says. "That's the only..."

He nods off. Ten seconds go by, then 20. The dog licks his hand.

When Knievel wakes and sees the visitor still sitting there, he gets angry. He's embarrassed, frustrated, in pain. "You have to go," he says, narrowing his eyes. "I have been known to have quite a temper. And I'm taking medication to stop it. But now I've got to get some sleep."

He's yelling now, pointing a crooked finger. "You gotta go. NOW!"

As the visitor exits, Knievel waves. "Thanks for coming," he calls. "Maybe I'll see you in Butte."

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A couple of weeks later Knievel makes it to Montana, but barely. Instead of staying with his daughter or in a hotel, he checks into an assisted living facility because he's weak and having trouble breathing.

"He's not doing very well," says his old friend, Bill Rundle. "But he says he'll hold on, at least long enough to lead the parade."

Rundle created Evel Knievel Days in 2002 as a way of honoring his buddy. The event brought bikers from across the West. Rundle hired stunt cyclists and built a dirt ramp in the middle of town and even got Robbie Knievel to be there for his dad.

Last year, about 30,000 people packed Butte for Evel days. More than 100 paid \$100 each to dine with "Himself," as the program calls him. Organizers had sold tickets to this year's event long before Knievel had the stroke.

The day before the festival, Rundle is concerned. "We had a tearful two-hour conversation last night," he says. "Evel says he's not going back

to Florida. He's going to get through this last show. Then he wants to die right here in Butte."

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Late Friday afternoon, more than 1,000 cycles—Hondas and Harleys, trikes and choppers—fill the street in front of the Finlen Hotel. A white pickup is parked at the head of the pack. It's striped with red and blue, sprinkled with stars. Even the leather seats are custom Evel. This is his ride.

Soon Rundle slides into the truck. He looks tired and worried. Are those tears in his eyes?

The bikers follow, revving their engines. The ground seems to tremble. "Where's Evel?" people in the crowd keep asking.

Four teenagers climb into the painted pickup. Turns out they're Evel's grandchildren. The truck pulls forward, without Knievel.

Evel misses his own parade.

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That night in the hotel banquet room, Evel images are everywhere. Plastic place mats show a blurry Knievel in his Skycycle. A mannequin in his jumpsuit is propped by the bar.

The head table is empty.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Rundle says. "Welcome to the Evel Knievel social." He pauses. A few people clap. "Evel wasn't feeling too well tonight. They had to take him to the hospital to find out what's wrong.

"But you know him. He just called. He's already checked out. He's on his way back here to join you," Rundle says.

"He doesn't want anyone saying they want their money back."

The salads have just been served when Knievel limps in, leaning on two friends. He sits down gingerly, then waves. The hospital band is still around his wrist.

"Everyone, please, let's enjoy our dinner," he says. "I just had a little spell with blood pressure. I think it was too much heat and overexertion on my part. But I'm okay now. Let's eat."

Breathing heavily, pausing between bites, Knievel shovels salad into his mouth while people walk up to shake his shaking hand.

After the entree is served, Knievel summons one of his helpers. He pushes back his chair, leans on the handle of his oxygen tank. "Thank you all very much. I had a tough day," he says.

He unfolds a small square of paper, thanks his doctors and his sponsors, says he has a new custom motorcycle company and there's a rock opera being written about him. It's like that time at Wembley Stadium, where he crashed and broke everything and got up and talked to the crowd anyway.

"I hate to duck out right now," he says. "But I just have to. Thank you so much for coming to see me. God bless all of you."

When he stands up the audience does too, clapping and chanting "Evel, Evel, Evel!" Forty-two minutes after he arrived, Knievel makes his way to the door, propped up by a friend, but still standing.