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- APARTMENTS
- HOUSES/CONDOS
- JOBS
- MATCHES
- CLASSIFIEDS
- STRAIGHT DOPE
- HOT TYPE
- SAVAGE LOVE
- BLOGS
- RESTAURANTS
- MOVIES
- MUSIC
- THEATER/PERFORM
- FASHION
- FREE SHIT
- STAND-UP COMEDY
- IMPROV/SKETCH
- ART
- DANCE
- READINGS
- SPOKEN WORD
- READER
- RECOMMENDS
- DAILY SPECIALS
- LISTINGS SEARCH
- READER'S GUIDES
- ARCHIVES
- BOOKSHELF

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I Saw You

London After Midnight show 6/13

You rode up to the Metro on an army green mountain bike and you had a blue t-shirt with a white skeleton print. I wish that I didn't have to leave the show early to ride to work or I would've said hi. Maybe we could go for a ride sometime.

Matches

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Our Town

Wheels Is Wheels

John "J2" Mryczko won't let a little quadriplegia stand between him and extremeness.

By Laura Putre

May 1, 2008

At age 19, John "J2" Mryczko crashed a friend's motorcycle going 120 mph around a curve. He ended up paralyzed from the chest down, with some movement in his arms and none in his fingers, though he could use his hands as claws. After three months at the Rehabilitation Institute downtown, he moved into the front room of his mom's house in Morton Grove, where he's lived for the last nine years. He requires round-the-clock attention from family members and a part-time caregiver.

Mryczko says he moped around a lot in the weeks and months following the accident. He had no job, and he couldn't go far without someone to drive him. His girlfriend started dating another guy. Other friends didn't come around much anymore.

You might think that in a time like this a guy would reflect on the risk-taking behavior that put him in a wheelchair in the first place. But not Mryczko, who says he's a doer, not a thinker. In middle school he used to snowboard off the roof of the house while his parents were at work. A friend from high school remembers him trying over and over to ride a BMX bike down the metal handrails of steps at a nearby park until the bike was too broken to ride. Years later he'd return and ride down them backward in his wheelchair.

During his stay at the Rehabilitation Institute, he liked taking off into the city in his wheelchair and hopping curbs. "That's how it started," he says. When he got home his friend Shaun Harkin built him some low wooden ramps to jump in his motorized chair. He's been doing that since. Last October he gashed open his face and fractured his humerus while attempting a jump in his mom's driveway. He claims he enjoyed it.

"I feel good after a crash because it makes me feel alive," he says. "I get tingles. I get happy. It fills a spot in my body. A few seconds feel like a few minutes of freedom."

A clip of the October wipeout is on his Web site, j2rollson.com. (J2 is a nickname from grade school, when he joined a class that already had a John.) "See my arm behind me?" he says as it plays on his computer. "I didn't notice that the first few times I watched that. That could be where I broke my bone." He didn't realize it yet but he'd broken another bone the night before at the House of Blues. He's not sure how that happened: "Maybe some girls jumping on my lap."

Mryczko is obsessive about videotaping his stunts, even the unsuccessful ones. "I wish I had my motorcycle accident on film," he says. "I would love to see it."

One especially boring summer day in 2001, Mryczko made an impulse decision to visit a friend in Elk Grove Village, 20 miles away—by wheelchair. It took him three hours to get there. Where there were no sidewalks he used the street.

That adventure inspired him to try a longer, premeditated trip in August 2002—a 60-mile ride north to Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. Mryczko traveled in temperatures that hit 98 degrees, an extreme made more dangerous by the fact that as a result of his accident his sweat glands don't work. (When he starts to feel overheated "like a pressure cooker inside," he pours water on himself to cool down.) Where there were sidewalks Mryczko took them, but he estimates that about 65 percent of the time he rode on the shoulder of the road—and where there wasn't a shoulder he rode in traffic.

The plan worried Mryczko's mother, Halina, a Polish immigrant who cleans houses for a living, and his three younger sisters. "He was going to do what he was going to do, but we decided at least we could be there, too," says his eldest sister, Anna, a 26-year-old nurse.

They insisted on following him in a van and rendezvousing at checkpoints—a McDonald's, a gas station—along the route. "If he needed something, we would stop," says Anna, "if he needed a drink or to go to the bathroom. There's always that potential for a problem, like if his chair breaks down."

Others were concerned too. Mryczko spent the first night with Harkin, who lives outside Gurnee. "My mom put a big flag on the back of his chair so people could see him," Harkin recalls. "I think she was more worried about him than anybody."

Suburban police ordered Mryczko off the road twice. Once was at the intersection of Milwaukee and Hintz in Wheeling, a familiar area—his fateful motorcycle crack-up had taken place just south of there on Hintz.



"Get your ass off the road—what are you, crazy?" Mryczko remembers the cop yelling. But ten minutes later he was back on the asphalt. "I'm like—is it my fault there are no sidewalks in your town?" he says. Mryczko spent the second night at his grandmother's in Pell Lake, Wisconsin. The trip took a total of 17 hours spread over three days.

In 2005 Mryczko decided to sponsor the ride (and donate extra batteries), sending out promotional packages to dozens of companies, but he's had luck only with a wheelchair suspension maker called Frog Legs, which now gives him free replacement parts.

"I'm still waiting for a wheelchair company to sponsor me," Mryczko says. "I don't know what's taking them so long. If I had a company, I'd sponsor me. I think I'm a pretty good promotional opportunity. Check out how far our wheelchairs have gone. John "J2" Mryczko went 120 miles in an Omega Trac." He wishes he owned a rugged Omega Trac, but they cost upwards of \$20,000 and his insurance won't cover one. He rides an Invacare 3G Ranger X, which goes for about \$7,000.

Last year's trail ride netted \$500 in donations from businesses, friends, and family. Mryczko kept about \$150 to cover his online expenses and donated the rest to the W.M. Keck Center for Collaborative Neuroscience at Rutgers University.

This summer Mryczko is promoting a weeklong Rollathon, starting July 4. He intends to ride 180 miles, from Morton Grove to Davenport, Iowa. He's publicizing the ride through word of mouth, his Web sites, and postcards and flyers he's placing in businesses in and around Morton Grove. But, he confesses, "I don't know if anyone's going to join me on that one."

Anyone in a wheelchair, that is. Anna Mryczko says with a sigh that she and her mom will probably trail J2 on this trip, too.

Until she got a place of her own two years ago, Anna used to take care of her brother every day, helping him eat, get in and out of bed, and go to the bathroom. Now she still cares for him three times a week.

She says she's glad her brother is trying to stay active in the world he loves. "It gives him this feeling of euphoria, 'I can do whatever I want, I can do anything—I think everybody needs that at some point in their lives.'" Plus, "he's kind of stubborn. He's not really going to listen to anybody else." **R**

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Comments

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KRS at 11:32 PM on 5/7/2008

Holy Smokes there's a lot of the word "Mryczko" in this article... RIGHT.ON!, RIGHT.ON!.... So what's next..., FOX News, E! True Hollywood Story, A&E Biography...? NICE... Keep 'em coming....

[Flag as inappropriate](#)

Don De Witt at 11:45 AM on 5/9/2008

J2, I like the, "don't give up" and "back for more" attitude. What you're doing is inspiring and motivational. Your pursuit says a lot about doing what you love. "Roll out" - Ludacris

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Tim Simms at 8:02 AM on 5/19/2008

I have never met an more out going individual, with a this is how my life is and I'm not going to let it slow me down attitude. Good luck on your ride!

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Jenny at 3:27 PM on 6/17/2008

Love the article! J2 rocks!

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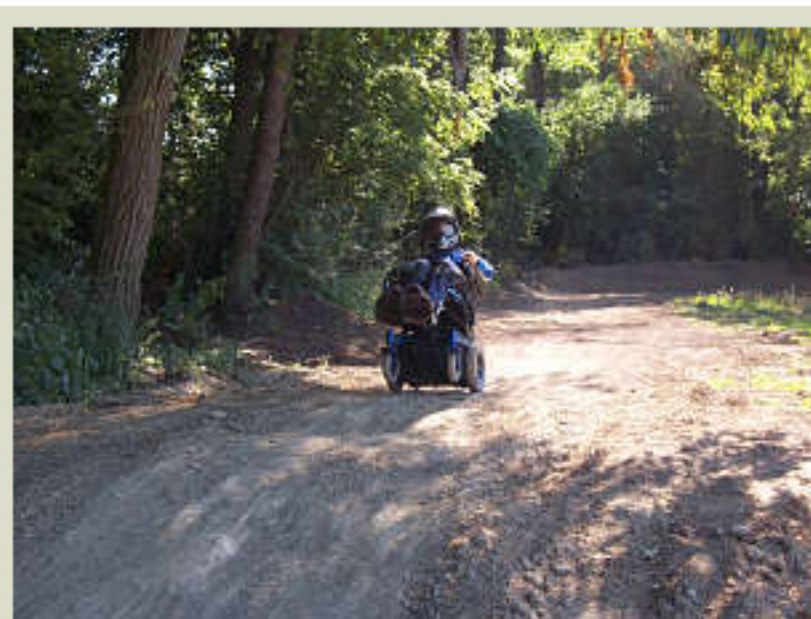
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What is 0+62



John Mryczko



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Matches

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