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KEEPING YOUR RHYTHM TO THE LIMIT

Preparing for a world Rally event is like nothing else

WELCOME to my first official rally column in *TRAILRIDER* magazine. I hope that you will be able to relate through my adventures as a rider, from preparation to racing and that constant discovery we all thrill for on a motorbike.

You may have heard of me during the 2006 and 2007 Dakar Rally through the SBS television coverage, but my story goes way back. As a kid I grew up in the Ivory Coast in West Africa. I was racing and teaching motocross and supercross; that was my passion and still is.

Like many today, I moved from Africa to the mecca of motocross in San Diego, California. I even raced wearing the famous 111 at local races in Southern California. Very early on, I opted for university degrees to look after my old days as opposed to motocross. I still raced, I still broke bones and I still made friends wherever I went racing, from Africa to the US, down to Mexico and Australia. I have now made Australia home and still work on my "How's it going, mate?" accent.

MEMOIRS OF AN MX RACER

The most memorable moment I experienced was racing in front of 220,000 spectators at the West African Motocross des Nations. That's right, it's not a typo — there were nearly a third of a million people watching and encouraging us. Imagine five sold-out stadiums around a 2.5km motocross track. I won for the Ivory Coast.

As a kid growing up in 100 per cent humidity in Africa, training smarter was the only option to get to the top as quickly as possible. Now, rally events have thought me a few more things that I'd like to share with you.

While preparing for rally events, something keeps hitting me in the face. Rallies are not so much about how fast you can go or about how physically fit you are; they're not about how mentally or emotionally strong you are, or how you can deal with desperate situations in a calm, yet determined manner. I thought those were it, but they were not; they are only bare prerequisites one must have or develop over time.

Racing rally events is mostly about rhythm. You

race to a self-imposed rhythm. You manage your time to a self-imposed clock which allows you to prepare your road book, eat, assist your mechanic if you have one, and sleep. Everything else, like chatting to your mates, is OK for short racing days, but when you race an average of 600-800km per day for two weeks, every minute is precious. Every ounce of energy is gold, every drip of water you drink is heaven.

I realised this the hard way when I raced one of the cross-country world championship rounds in Brazil last August. I was sick with food poisoning and dehydration and couldn't eat or drink anything for four days out of the nine-day rally. I still can't remember some days. I raced on the edge of human possibilities and barely kept my tongue from falling into my throat.

PUSHING THE EDGE

The race rhythm starts with your training rhythm. You can't expect much if you don't train smart. You don't have to train hard, but you have to train to your body abilities and listen to your own limitations.

Those limitations will lift themselves up with time. Don't force it too much, but keep doing something physical that you like. There's no point in being disappointed with a result, wishing you'd done something different during the race — that's too late. During training is where it should have happened.

I find myself sometimes saying, "Oh, I'm a bit tired today, I'll go for a mountain bike ride tomorrow or do my abs later." But every time I do this I go to sleep with a guilty feeling because I know exactly what will happen if I keep repeating this pattern of behaviour over the long run.

The trick is to keep your training rhythm up there and balance this with other activities as best as possible. Most of you will be a privateer, just like me, trying to do something in the best possible way while still working, looking for a bit of sponsorship support and trying to get good results. We don't have eight hours to train per day, but what we can do is manage time more efficiently. Down time can be used to do something. Use it or lose it forever.


Personally I try to vary the types of exercises I do. That helps me keep my "interest rhythm" up there. I do some canoe to work on my shoulders and upper body. I do mountain bike riding for my lower body and endurance. I climb rocks to work on my stretching. I swim to work on my breathing. I run in the sand dunes and climb mountains to work on my cardio-vascular system. I maintain a rhythm of various activities and listen to what my body feels like doing today.

Just do something every day, even if it's going for a long walk. I know that if you do that and you love racing motorcycles, then it's just a matter of time until you start climbing stairs two by two or three by three just to see if you can do it. It's in the blood, isn't it?

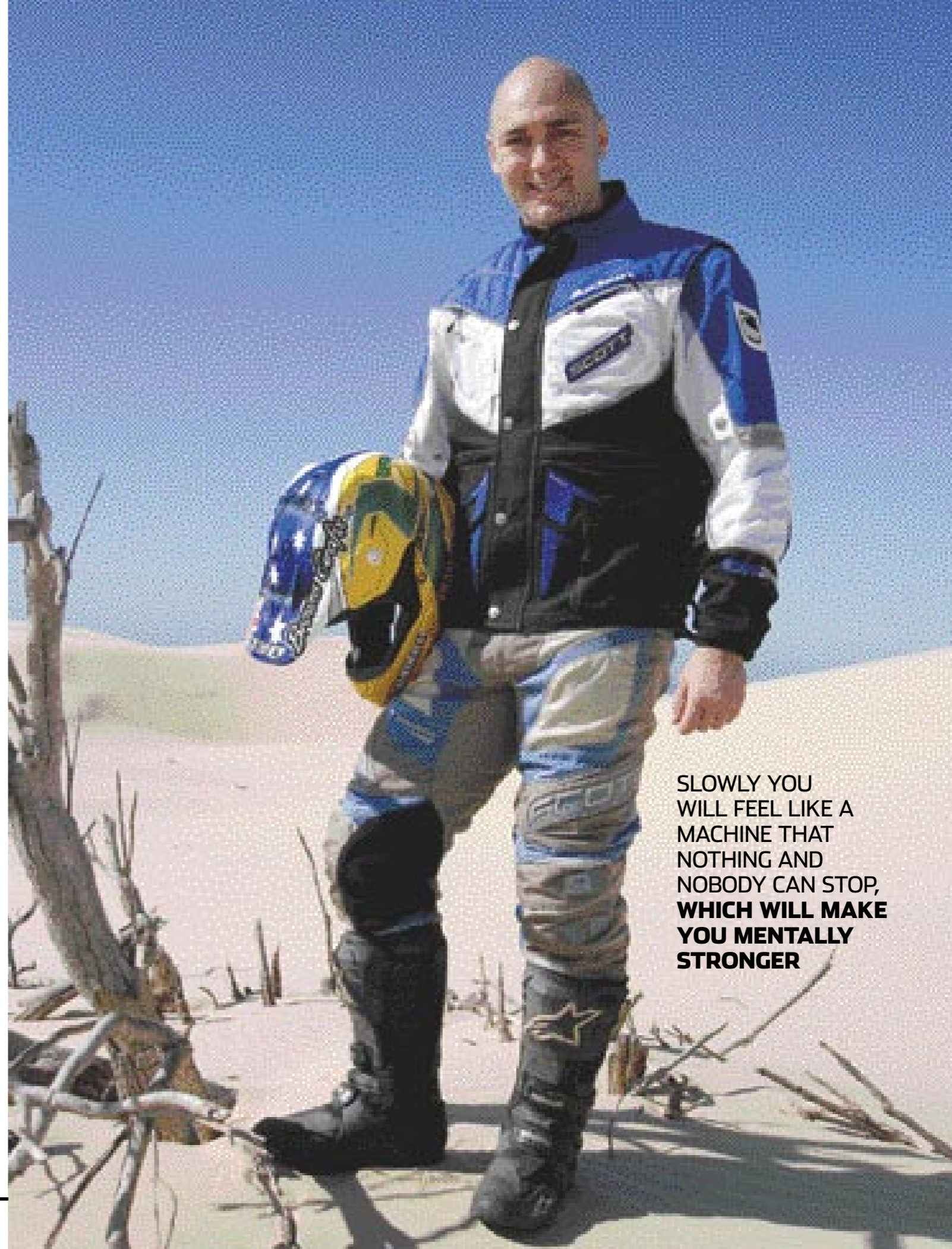
As days and months go by before a big event like a multi-day fun ride or a rally, continue to increase this training rhythm. This rhythm will slowly develop into a discipline and that discipline will get you better results in the end — or a much higher satisfaction level when you see how buggered your friends are when you take off your helmet and still breathe through your nose.

You will not get tired in between stages, you will not feel muscle aches any more, and slowly you will feel like a machine that nothing and nobody can stop, which will make you mentally stronger. This takes time to develop. Be aware of how you train and you won't regret it.

Train moderately at the beginning and always make sure you let your body rest sufficiently, always avoiding putting too much strain on your system. You won't win the race on race day; you will win the race with your training. A long trailride or a race will just be a tick mark, a formality, a final test of preparation. The hard work was months prior. Not only will it keep you riding well, but you will avoid injuries, too.

Finally, it doesn't matter whether you finish first or last. What is important is that you take part and that you have a go, while others wish they had. 

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