

NO HOLDING BACK

■ A motorcycle accident cost Johnny Sanders the use of his legs, but he still is all about driving fast.

By DAWN REISS
Times Staff Writer

INVERNESS — Johnny Sanders is sweating and anxious. It took the stock car racer two hours to get out of bed and get dressed, and he's late getting to Citrus County Speedway.

Some days, today included, he debates whether the drive from Homosassa is worth it. But in the end, he loves to race, despite the exhausting ordeal that is everyday life. Sanders, 44, has been dealing with this for 25 years, since a motorcycle accident left him a paraplegic.

He's always been a daredevil. Lucky to be alive. He jokes that he is a cat with nine lives, and he's been on No. 9 for a long time. He comes by it naturally. When his mother, Becky, was six-months pregnant with him, she was riding on the back of a motorcycle when Sanders' father, Dewey, took off too fast and almost dumped her off the bike.

"I could have died before I was even born," Sanders said. "So I feel it's kind of fitting that I almost killed myself on a motorcycle."

Growing up, his uncle broke a collar bone and his father, who owned Citrus County Speedway with Becky from 1977-78, broke an arm while driving. Breaking body parts seemed like a part of life.

Sanders doesn't remember the first time he rode a motorcycle, but by age 7, he was driving solo. He barely had enough weight to "kick over" the Harley Sportster because his father, Dewey, didn't believe in electric starters. His dad would put it in first or second gear, running beside until Sanders would take off around his back yard.



Sportsman driver Johnny Sanders of Homosassa returns to the Citrus County Speedway pit area after checking in at the race office and receiving his qualifying heat information.

Times photos — RON THOMPSON

He spent his first year at Dune-din Junior High with a collarbone brace after he flipped the bike in the woods. While Sanders was healing his dad bought him a three-wheeler. Dirt bikes, street bikes, it didn't matter.

By 16 he was drag racing like his father. Sanders remembers looking down to see the speedometer registering 120 mph on the Harley. "I love to go fast," Sanders said.

At 19, his luck changed. He left work with a friend on a Yamaha RD 400 in Largo. His friend hopped on the back. It was June 10, 1980. They were driving down East Bay Drive, doing 102 mph, coming up to a light.

"I was young and had been racing fast all my life," Sanders said.

Sanders decided to change

from the left to the right lane behind a car. The light turned yellow and the car hit its brakes. Sanders jerked on the brakes too, but they locked up. He swerved toward the narrow strip of road between the car and curb before he clipped the right end of the car's bumper. It tossed Sanders' friend to the grass, but he continued to skid another 30 feet sideways through the four-lane intersection into oncoming traffic. He hit a concrete light pole, a stop sign and a fire hydrant, ripping much of his skin off and crushing bones. A helmet saved Sanders from severe head trauma, though the fire hydrant went through his helmet and touched his scalp. Seven teeth shattered.

"A cop on duty said he saw me and doubted that I'd live," Sanders said. "Those were my first thoughts."

He can remember only a few things, like his teeth shattering.

"I remember seeing a face, a guy trying to extract the broken teeth out of my mouth, then I

blacked out," he said. "I remember some guy next to me in the hospital had rolled a convertible and the surgeon said he was brain dead."

Bits and pieces flash through his mind. For weeks he had to lay perfectly still, strapped in a bed. Every few hours the nurses would sandwich a mattress on top of his body and rotate his bed 180 degrees like a rotisserie chicken.

But everything still seemed fuzzy.

"I remember at some point that I wanted to go," Sanders said. "I wanted to get up. That's when they told me I couldn't walk, that I would never walk again."

He remembers being upset, and his aunt telling him on the phone that his family already knew.

"I quit crying," Sanders said. "It no longer bothered me after that."

He spent the next three months in the hospital rehabilitating. Sanders could move his arm and sense minimal human touch below his upper back.



Sanders (left), who 25 years ago was in an accident that left him a paraplegic, enters the car through a special cutaway section in the frame. He pushes his legs in first, then uses his strong upper body to pull himself into the vehicle. The 44-year-old drives his red No. 36 Camaro using hand controls that are just below the steering wheel. Sanders (right), gathering for a pre-race meeting, is a mainstay at the track and admired by many. "There are guys out there with four working limbs that can't do half the job out there that he can with two hands," says Inverness' Henry Stauffer, who runs the pit crew for Sanders. An IT manager for a furniture company in Ocala, Sanders thinks everything he goes through to race is worth it. "I don't know what I would be doing if I wasn't driving."

SPINAL CORD INJURY FACTS

- 250,000 Americans sustain spinal cord injuries.
- 52 percent of the injured individuals are considered paraplegic and 47 percent quadriplegic.
- About 11,000 injuries occur each year.
- 82 percent of the injured are male.
- 56 percent of the injuries occur between the ages of 16 and 30.
- The average age of the injured person is 31.

■ The injuries are most commonly caused by vehicular accidents, 37 percent; violence, 28 percent; falls, 21 percent; sports, 6 percent; other, 8 percent.

- The most rapidly increasing cause of injuries is violence.
- Vehicular accident injuries are decreasing in number.

— SOURCE: The University of Alabama National Spinal Cord Injury Statistical Center, March 2002.

Before they released him from the hospital, Sanders learned how to drive with hand controls.

"After the second time, it felt normal," he said. "It took longer to learn how to drive the first time than with the hand controls."

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It was 15 years after his accident before Sanders decided to drive a stock car. His father had been dead for a year after falling off the side of a mountain on a motorcycle in North Carolina.

That was 10 years ago. His red No. 36 Camaro with a Monte Carlo body is a mainstay in Citrus County Speedway's Sportsman class. He has had help from friends such as Dick Chaulker, who would come over after work to help build a car, and Henry Stauffer, 28, of Inverness, who runs the pit crew for Sanders and his younger brother, Dale.

"There are guys out there with four working limbs that can't do half the job out there that he can with two hands," Stauffer said.

Sanders likes to arrive late and takes only a lap or two to warm up. Too many laps sap precious energy. His left hand turns the wheel and the right is on the throttle.

"It's like doing 50 sets of 300-pound bench presses with one arm," Stauffer said.

As the race goes on, his arms begin to spasm. He prays for cautions so he can relax. The roll cages protect him, but he has to be especially careful to tighten every belt, including one around his feet to hold his body in position. He worries about his catheter kinking or over-filling, so he doesn't eat or drink anything. He wears a one-piece fireproof suit, because a cooler two-piece just slides off his rear when he gets in the car. Instead of climbing through the window, Sanders has a removable door that allows him to enter by pulling his body feet-first into the seat.

But it's all worth it. "I don't know what I would be doing if I wasn't driving," said Sanders, who

works as IT manager for a furniture company in Ocala. "I'd probably shoot myself. Sex and race cars pretty much get my adrenaline going. I'm too fat and ugly to get the chicks, so I guess it's race cars."

On this particular night, Sanders randomly is seeded sixth. He likes to start from the back, where there isn't pressure. He moves into fourth place by Lap 6. On Lap 14, a car blows up and he rolls into third. A clean and cautious driver, Sanders hesitates and then passes the No. 59 car on Lap 22. He speeds around, lap after lap until a late burst on Lap 39 puts him in second at the 40-lap finish. The win makes Sanders the Sportsman points leader for a few weeks.

"I needed the car to go, but I was just too tired," Sanders said. "My muscles started giving out."

The win is nice, but even now with Sanders, it's still about going fast. "I don't care where I finish, I'm just here for the fun of it."

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