



J.J. YELEY

Ready to Race Again

HUNTERSVILLE, N.C. (Nov. 10, 2009) – For J.J. Yeley, being forced to sit idle and watch races as opposed to driving in them has been one of the toughest things he’s had to endure since he first began racing 16 years ago.

Everything changed the night of Aug. 22 for the Phoenix native when the Sprint Bandit car he was driving at Lakeside Speedway in Kansas City, Kan., quickly turned Yeley into a passenger on a wild, hair-raising ride.

The race had just restarted for the third time when the 2003 USAC Triple Crown champion, who was running third at the time, took off into turn one. As he went into the corner, his car caught the track, flipped and barrel-rolled at least eight times. Although Yeley thought he had nothing more than a sore neck following the crash, he soon learned that he had fractured three vertebrae.

Since that night, Yeley has worn a neck collar and undergone neck surgery, where doctors fused two vertebrae with screws and a metal plate. And now, just a month after the outpatient surgery, the 33-year-old is working out daily to rebuild the muscles in his neck and shoulders. So far, his healing process has been speedy, above average according to the specialists and doctors Yeley has spoken with in the last two months. With one more test to pass, he hopes to be cleared by doctors in December, which he says is just in time for the 2010 racing season.

With that in mind, Yeley, who has 95 NASCAR Sprint Cup Series starts and 118 NASCAR Nationwide Series starts, has been working the phones, talking to prospective teams and sponsors about a return to the sport that he loves. Being a spectator has refueled Yeley’s passion, and he is ready to race again.

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What happened in that Aug. 22 accident at Lakeside Speedway?

“For the most part it was a typical Sprint Car type of accident. At the start of the race, the racetrack had a lot of grip, so it was real tacky. It was actually the third restart from cars that had already flipped. I just went in the corner by myself, caught a rut, the car bicycled and started flipping off the left side of the cage. It did a good amount of barrel rolls, probably close to eight or 10. It hit two or three times really hard and I’m thinking the next to last hit was the one that jarred me in a way that was kind of like a major whiplash that would have stretched my neck and fractured the vertebrae. It wasn’t necessarily a break as much as it had taken two of the vertebrae in my neck and perched them on top of each other.”

What kind of rehab have you had to undergo?

“That’s the beauty of the surgery that I ended up having. I could’ve went the natural healing route, which would’ve put me in a neck collar for a good three to four months, and at the end of that time the vertebrae would’ve fused themselves. I chose to go ahead and do the surgery with Dr. (Dom) Coric (a neurosurgeon with Carolina Neurosurgery & Spine Associates in Charlotte) in North Carolina who is one of the best neck surgeons in the United States. It was an outpatient procedure. I went in at 7 a.m. and was home by 1 o’clock in the afternoon. They went through the front of my neck, so I will always have a little tiny scar in the front to show my little battle wound. It’s the first time I’ve ever been injured in a racecar. For me, I guess I should consider myself lucky that I’ve made it right at 16 years racing professionally without any kind of major injury. The major thing for me is just basically taking it easy, letting the fusion heal 100 percent for where they inserted the screws and the plates. I do some laser treatments. I do some small things that help speed up the process of the fusion with the bone. It’s been more than a month now since my surgery, so I can start to get back to a regular exercise program just to kind of make up for the muscle I’ve lost from not doing much for the last two months.”

You said that you’re at a point where you can start exercising and working out to get re-conditioned to get back into a racecar. How long will you have to be in rehab? How long will it be before every day, normal things are easy for you?

“They’ve been very easy for me, and I know from talking to some of the different doctors and people who have been in related situations to what I’ve been in that a lot of people are surprised of how far along I already am with my recovery. I’m back to doing all the things I’ve always been able to do. With regard to lifting weights, I’m just taking it easy. I don’t want to push myself too far, too fast. But as far as everyday stuff, I’m able to do regular yard work. I’ve played golf a couple of times and I play just as bad now as I did before I hurt myself, so I guess I’m back to as normal as possible. For the most part, I feel fine. I have a little more aches and pains than I did before. Racing as long as I have and just racing in general takes a toll on a body, regardless. I do have some lower back pain that I get all the time, so it’s just one added pain that I didn’t have before. For the most part, it almost seemed more like a dream of having this happen to me, and the next has been a reality. I’m just thankful for all the people who have helped out. I guess I never really thought about it or took it seriously – the fact that another quarter-inch or an eighth-inch of movement in my neck, I could’ve been paralyzed or I could’ve been killed, according to the doctors. For me, I had a little bit of a sore neck when I got out of the racecar. Then at the hospital, everybody was in a panic because they thought that it was more severe than I ever would’ve thought.”

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Do you still see Dr. Coric on a routine basis? Do you have weekly appointments or physical therapists? Where do you stand with the doctors at this point in your recovery process?

“At this point, I’ve had a follow-up with Dr. Coric. They’ve taken X-rays. They are very happy with the alignment and the way everything looks. Right now, I think I have one hurdle left that I have to get over. They want to do another X-ray in December, and at that time, at the rate I’ve been going, they see no problems to clear me to go back to racing. Obviously, that gives me plenty of time to get ready for the 2010 racing season. For the most part, I’ve got 80 to 85 percent of my original range of motion in my head and neck. I’m able to turn my head fine. I’m just a little slow from looking up. I think that’s probably my most challenging maneuver is to try to look up at the sky. I just don’t have quite the movement I did before. I also understand that by fusing two vertebrae, I’m going to lose a little bit of motion anyway. From the people and specialists I’ve seen, they are already very surprised at how far and advanced I am in getting back to normal.”

When do you think you will be cleared to get back into a racecar?

“I think a lot of that is up to me and how hard I really want to push the envelope. I know that I’ve had a couple of calls and a couple of opportunities to maybe fill-in some rides at the end of the season. I also know that this injury I have – it is very, very serious and pushing it too soon, too fast could either slow down my healing process or obviously put me back into danger. For me, I’ve definitely written off the 2009 season. They want to do another X-ray in December. If they see no problems with it, then I’ll be clear. The doctors tell me that by doing the fusion with the screws and the plates that those vertebrae are actually stronger in that portion of the neck than they would’ve been naturally. Obviously, it’s going to make it a little bit weaker above and below in the natural area, and that’s why I have to focus on getting the strength back in my neck and my shoulders to help support everything. For the most part, the area is stronger now than it was before the accident.”

You said you’ve written off the 2009 season. Is your plan to be able to run the Chili Bowl in January?

“It is my plan. I’ve been spending a lot more time on the phone, talking with different sponsors and scouting out different opportunities. Getting back into NASCAR, it does look like there are some pretty good possibilities for getting back into a Nationwide ride next season. I have some meetings in the next couple of weeks that could secure the sponsorship and make that all happen. As far as looking forward to the Chili Bowl and some of the bigger races that guys always get a chance to go do, I would probably be healed by then. We will just kind of play it by ear and see how things go as far as the big plans for next year.”

Has this accident refueled your passion and desire to get back into NASCAR?

“It makes the passion for me even stronger. I had some opportunities coming up that I basically had to abort because of the injury. It’s different when you’re forced not to be able to do something versus not having the opportunity or the chances or passing up on different rides. Being told that you have to sit idle, that you can’t do something, I guess makes you want it even more. It’s easy to take for granted just the simple things in life when you’re not allowed to do them. For so long I was told not to lift anything over five pounds. I couldn’t do certain things and different activities. It really makes you think about the things you love and the things you want to do. The beauty of it is, I’ve obviously gotten to spend a lot of time with my family and my daughter. In between Kristen (wife) and Faith (daughter), they’ve made this whole process a lot easier on me. But it’s time for me to get back into a racecar and prove myself and get back to doing what I always loved, and that’s trying to win races and go out and do a good job.

“I was out at the racetrack at Charlotte on Friday for a good portion of the day. For the first month before I had the surgery, I was in a collar. Even though I felt fine and there was no real serious injury, just the visual aspect of walking around in a collar, people just form an opinion immediately. I wanted to make sure that I got out to the racetrack, especially at Charlotte, and walk around and talk to some old friends and some prospective teams and let people know that rumor mills run wild in racing and we all know that. I know a lot of people thought I was in a halo, that my neck was broken that it was a lot more serious injury than it actually was.

“I think it’s something that’s important for everyone to know. As serious as the injury was, it wasn’t a broken neck it and it wasn’t as severe as it could’ve been. Whenever I am cleared, I will be 100 percent ready to go racing. I’ve been doing this for so long, I’m lucky I’ve made it this long before I’ve had any kind of real injury. I just want to educate the people and the fans, let them know that I’m fine and ready to get back to it. I’m just trying to put some of those rumors to rest. Let people know that I’m healthy and hopefully will be ready to go here pretty soon.”

Will you have an announcement soon about your plans for 2010?

“That’s been the major hurdle. Obviously, the economy has hurt every form of racing there is. We’re getting closer and closer to getting something 100 percent signed. Hopefully, in the next two to three weeks, things will go like they are looking and we’ll be able to make an announcement and let everyone know what’s going on with J.J. Yeley and the future for 2010.”