

TBI SURVIVOR

Ernie Irvan, NASCAR driver

Interview by **Kimberly Paetzold**



The story of NASCAR driver Ernie Irvan can serve as a great inspiration for all ABI survivors. In the following interview, Ernie candidly recounts his racing accident that nearly ended his life, his comeback in the world of NASCAR racing, and a second accident that prompted him into retirement.

Hello Ernie, thank you for taking this time to interview. As I read your biography, I noticed that you were in the peak of your career when your initial accident occurred. Named one of the top 50 drivers of NASCAR, you were considered unbeatable. Will you recount the events that led to your TBI?

Actually, I have been injured twice. The first injury was while racing at the Michigan Speedway on August 20, 1994. I was going about 180 mph, and my right front tire blew – I hit the concrete wall and crashed. Knocked unconscious, I was airlifted to the trauma center at a nearby hospital (St. Joseph's Mercy Hospital in Ann Arbor, MI). The doctors diagnosed me with critical brain and lung injuries and gave me a 5-10% chance of making it through the night. But I was fortunate – with good doctors and rehab I was able to return to racing at the end of the 1995 season, about one year later.

My second accident occurred 5 years later to the day – August 20, 1999. Again at the Michigan Speedway while practicing for the Busch Series race, I crashed. And once again, I was airlifted from the track. The diagnosis was a mild head injury and bruised lung as a result of the accident.

How did these events at the Michigan Speedway alter your life and profession?

After the August 1999 accident, I decided to retire from racing. As you know, once you have a traumatic brain injury, the risk factors increase for additional TBI's. Multiple TBI's make it harder to recover, and I wanted to make sure I was there for my family. I now dedicate my time to my Race2Safety Foundation founded for TBI prevention and awareness.

I would also like to state that I feel very fortunate to have a loving wife and children. They have been there for me and have supported me, and it's a blessing to be part of their lives. My wife was always there to secure and make things right, and it's because of my family that I was able to function and recover. My son was born after my first accident, and I feel fortunate that I can be here for him.

Did you or are you currently in TBI recovery treatment?

I'm not currently in treatment, but I was in intensive therapy for 3 or 4 months following my initial accident. I had to learn how to walk again – my balance was really bad. I used to play racquetball, and I wasn't able to anymore. A lot of things changed in my life. I still have short-term memory loss, which the doctors told me is due to the location of my brain injury, and that's something I will have to live with. I can still read – but it's very hard for me. It's hard for me to focus on one thing, and I get double vision because of the eye injuries I incurred. I had to relearn many things in order to be able to function again with the handicaps. In spite of my injuries, I consider myself fortunate – There is life after TBI.

Your foundation, Race2Safety is sponsoring a L.A.P.S. WALK. Would you tell us about this?

My foundation Race2Safety and the Brain Injury Association of Michigan are sponsoring a walkathon at the Michigan International Speedway on August 17, 2005. At the Michigan Race Track, my life turned 360 degrees – I got hurt real bad there, but the local doctors also saved my life. Also, the last race I won was at Michigan. Then 5 years later I was injured, and again the doctors saved my life. The Michigan Speedway has had a big impact on my life, and I feel privileged to do my first walkathon there.

What is the purpose of your foundation?

We would like to reduce the amount of traumatic brain injuries in the United States, and a key factor to accomplishing this is promoting awareness. In this country, someone sustains a TBI every 23 seconds, and I would like to see this number reduced through awareness and safety measures. Even if we can change this statistic to every 25 seconds, that would reduce the number of tragedies which occur. There is life after a TBI, but it would be much better to eliminate these injuries. TBI's are preventable. One preventative measure is using the proper gear and attire.

Because there are almost a half a million bicycle related injuries (and add to that scooters), I am involved with helping develop a safety helmet that will actually fit. It'll look cool and be affordable. We also would like to create a program where the helmets could be distributed to underprivileged kids. TBI's don't discriminate based on social standing, and all children need to be protected. This is what our L.A.P.S. WALK is all about. ♦

For more information log on to www.race2safety.com or www.lapswalk.org/