

bad queen

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU PUT
ADRENALIN JUNKIE JANINE DAVIES
ON A 1 000 CC MOTORBIKE? THRILLS,
SPILLS AND HISTORY - THAT'S WHAT

By Heather Ingarfield





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Our first interview was cancelled quite suddenly. During the final minutes of the South African National Championships, Janine Davies, burning rubber to finish in second, lost control of her BMW S1000RR motorbike. 'I was 10 points away from being the first woman to finish top three in a national environment,' Janine tells me over a Red Bull. 'I wanted it so badly. It was the last race of the year and I was doing so well. I just pushed a little too hard.'

When she awoke in the ambulance, her injuries (which included a concussion, haematoma in her arm and a broken wrist) were the least of her concerns. She wanted to race again.

It's more than a month later, and Janine's flown down to Cape Town from her home town Joburg for the cover shoot. Towering over scatterings of nail polish and lipsticks, her helmet sits proudly, the menacing scratches and dent remain untouched.

The motif of getting back on your bike – both literally and figuratively – after you've crashed has inspired many a motivational poster, quote and song. Janine, however, is the embodiment of this well-worn expression. 'I've grown up with the mentality of never giving up. If something goes bad, just move on, fix it and do it again.'

NEED FOR SPEED

Janine first hopped on the back of a bike at the age of 14 after watching a race with a friend. 'Wilmarie Janse van Rensburg won her race that day. When I saw her win, I knew that's who I wanted to be,' she says, adjusting her flowing white blouse. Her dad, former Western Province rugby player John Mitchell, was hesitant at first. 'I was an adrenalin junkie and excited about the motor world; my parents decided to support me in it instead of me trying to get my fix in my friends' cars or bikes.'

Twelve years later, the 26-year-old is not only hooked ('When you're riding, you're free; it's such a beautiful feeling'), but has broken records and made history. Her CV reads like something out of her childhood fantasy wish list – she was the first woman to compete in the South African SuperGP Champions Trophy on a 1 000 cc superbike and the first woman to make the podium when she took third place in the Derbi Development Championships. But her proudest accomplishment is one of triumphing over fear. 'My most memorable moment is the first time I won my race in the Derbi Development Series. It was my first race back after I had crashed at Zwartkops Raceway in 2007,' she says.

A MAN'S WORLD

Janine is outnumbered in a sport that comprises 95% men. But this doesn't faze her – and it certainly doesn't intimidate her. 'It's a man's sport. That's the attitude. And a woman is meant to be this dainty little lady who can't do it,' she laughs. Dainty and

little Janine is, but incapable of beating men is something she has proved to be an unfortunate assumption every time she slides her helmet over her golden locks.

'I've had men tell me that I'll never be able to do what they can do and others say that if I beat them, they're going to stop racing. It only makes me more motivated. When we're on the track, we're all the same, we're all equal. There might be a little tail sticking out the back of my helmet because of my hair, but we're all the same.'

Janine does acknowledge that men are naturally stronger, which gives them a slight edge when you are throwing around a 200 kg superbike. A matter of physiology, but not an obstacle. 'Women can train and get stronger. Last year, I was in the gym twice a day doing both cardio and weight training.'

CRASH-TEST DUMMY

With a career that spans over a decade, injuries come with the territory. When I ask Janine just how many crashes she's had, she almost chokes on her drink. 'Oh no, I was one of *those* racers. One year, I actually got an award for having the most crashes,' she chuckles. We settle on a figure: 50. One such incident left her in ICU for a week. 'I fractured a part of my neck, broke nine bones and had blood

WOMEN
FIRST

Aside from conquering the track and making podium, Janine's determined to boost the number of South African female racers. 'I think many women find it intimidating. They think it's dangerous and the bike is a crazy machine, but it's like driving a car, except you're out in the open – I want to say with the wind in your hair, but you do have a helmet on. Safety first,' Janine says.

In an effort to get more women on the track, she's started the Little Miss Racing Academy to create an environment where ladies can feel comfortable on a bike. 'I also want to find more female racers. My main focus is to develop a full female national race team that I can coach and take to race internationally.' For more information, go to littlemiss79.co.za.



<p>FAVOURITE MAKE-UP ITEM?</p>  <p>'I HAVE TO HAVE MASCARA.'</p>	<p>FASHION ITEM YOU CAN'T LIVE WITHOUT?</p>  <p>'DEFINITELY HANDBAGS!'</p>
<p>GUILTY PLEASURE?</p>  <p>'RED VELVET CUPCAKES. OR ANY CUPCAKE, ACTUALLY.'</p>	<p>SUNSET OR SUNRISE?</p>  <p>'BOTH. A MORNING RUN WITH A BEAUTIFUL SUNRISE IS ENERGISING. A SUNSET IS RELAXING.'</p>

in my lungs. I've got titanium all over my body.' In the face of the pain and trauma of the accident, she considered a career as an umbrella girl. But as the doctor was speaking to her, Janine's focus went to a race playing on the television in the background. 'When I saw that, it ignited that passion again. Bones will heal; I'll be fine.'

Her bones did heal, and Janine was back on her bike six months later. 'At first, they told me not to race competitively, but really, you can't tell me to race nicely,' she laughs. The ability to laugh it off has to be one of her secrets to success ('One time I had a concussion and had a fat chat to my sister on the phone, only to ask at the end who I was speaking to. It was hilarious').

Carpe diem – seize the day – comes to mind, but what about tomorrow? Surely putting your

body through such trauma has its consequences. 'I've been told I'm going to have arthritis in my shoulder. But it's not going to make me stop – by the time I get there, there's going to be some magic medicine that'll make me feel fine... Let's hope.'

STEP BY STEP

The scar on her arm from her most recent accident tightens and flexes as she regales me with more stories of her crashes – all of which end with her getting back on her bike. 'You can't live with the "what ifs?". You have to just deal with it. If you start thinking negatively about something, and you start worrying about it, you create your own problem. If you carry on thinking you're going to crash, then you will.' Janine relived these words when she crashed at one of the fastest tracks in

the country, the East London GP track. 'My bike was ruined, but I walked away from it, borrowed a bike and carried on. I had to get back mentally and go through that corner again after crashing at 260 km/h. I just thought, "I'll be okay".'

Growing up with a rugby player father, this was a philosophy Janine ate for breakfast. 'What he taught me was simple: never give up and focus on your passion.' Through her days spent competing knee-to-knee with some of the top racers in the country, Janine has morphed this knowledge into her own philosophy: 'You just have to take that step; you just have to take it'.

BREAKING STEREOTYPES

Janine is not only making history with her lap times and visits to the podium, she's also fighting tooth and nail to break the stereotypes associated with racing and female racers. 'I'm incredibly feminine and girly. I love being a woman – you can be so many different things. You can be in this male-dominated world and be all hard-core, and then take off your helmet and look at handbags.'

Just last year, she swapped her BMW for the rumba as a contestant on *Strictly Come Dancing*. For an adrenalin junkie, it was a pretty terrifying experience. 'I was a nervous wreck! I can dance in a club with, you know, a glass of wine or two inside my system, but with *Strictly*, you had to think about your moves and not mess them up because the judges were watching.'

Despite being the first eliminated (something that also doesn't bother her – 'People always remember who went out first!'), being immersed in the glitz and glamour was one of the best experiences of Janine's life.

It's on that note we end our interview. She hops into a taxi, tucking the scarred helmet under her arm while she reminds me of her two-year plan to pack up her life and move to Cape Town. You just have to take that step... ■