

DEFYING LIMITS

PEOPLE cruelly struck down by life-changing injuries is always a delicate subject and, sadly, one **speedway** has never been able to avoid.

Far too often we have seen riders, from superstars to novices, left paralysed from doing what they love.

Yes, we know it is a very risky and dangerous sport – but that doesn't make the lasting effects of bad crashes any easier to bear for the unfortunate wheelchair-bound people who suffered them or their families and loved ones.

Vitek Formánek, a prolific writer from the Czech Republic, will be a familiar name to some of you. For many years when Pardubice, his local track, hosted the annual Golden Helmet and Lubos Tomicek Memorial meetings, Vitek made a point of befriending foreign riders who visited his town and put them at ease. Sometimes he even put them up – the late Lee Richardson lived with him for almost a year.

Over decades this fluent English-speaker, a keen collector of original race-jackets (he has around 50), has contributed many words to speedway publications, mainly candid interviews with top Czech and other East European riders. By nature, he champions the underdog and has never been one to shy away from brutal reality. Growing up under the harsh communist regime no doubt shaped this straight-talking character's resilient outlook on life.

Vitek, 62, along with his partner and long-time soul-mate Eva Csölleová, has written 27 books on subjects as diverse as punk rock music, WW2 fighter pilots, the handicapped and homeless, films, autograph-collecting and of course speedway. Now the couple have just had their latest English language book published – and

Vitek and Eva, passionate storytellers and authors



there is a poignant speedway connection.

The 383-pager is titled *DEFYING LIMITS: How Extraordinary People Redefine Strength and Success*. Among 50 sportspeople and others, of varying degrees of disability, interviewed in a chatty Q&A-style are ex-riders Erik Gundersen and Evžen Erban.

In a phenomenal period of dominance spanning the 1980s, Denmark and Cradley Heath legend Gundersen won every major honour for club and country: three individual world titles, five World Pairs, seven World Team Cups and two World Longtrack finals most prominent among his FIM gold collection.

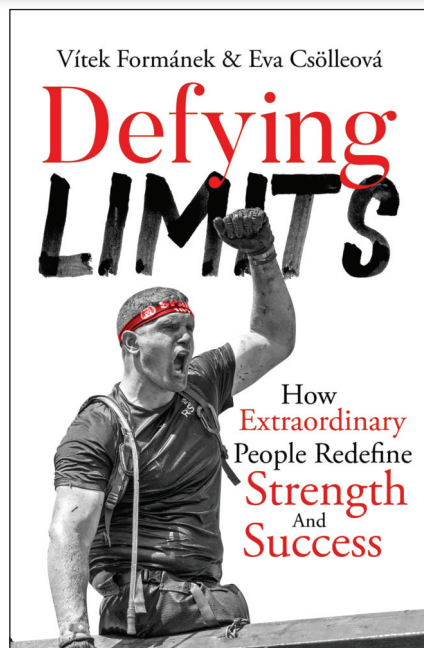
He would undoubtedly have added to that impressive medal haul had his glittering racing career not ended tragically on the first bend at Bradford on September 17, 1989 – Black Sunday – in Heat 1 of the World Team Cup Final.

The worst victim of a horrific four-rider pile-up, Erik lay motionless on the Odsal track, having swallowed his tongue. He was rushed to Pinderfields Hospital, where he could only breathe through a ventilator. One of his neck vertebrae was broken and it appeared he would be paralysed. But later, doctors placed his head in a metal frame and stabilised his spine, preventing paralysis.

Vitek asked Erik, who has his own 1,000-word chapter in the book: "What helped you most on your way back? Was it family, friends, determination, or the quality of healthcare and therapy?"

Gundersen, now 65, replied: "Acceptance. What helped me the most was accepting my situation. You first need to accept that you have a spinal injury and are disabled. You need to accept yourself and your new reality. From there, you must accept that you can't do everything on your own; you need help from others. Once you've walked that road of acceptance, you can truly appreciate the care, therapy and support from medical professionals, friends and family."

It happened on May 17, 1979, during a league match at Prague's Markéta Stadium. The visiting team, ZP Pardubice, sent their



riders **Evžen Erban into his fifth and final heat. In the pits, he removed his back protector—he was the first rider in Czechoslovakia to use one. A decision that, within minutes, would cost him dearly.**

On the penultimate lap, coming out of the last bend, his bike lifted and he crashed heavily, back-first, into the fence. He lay motionless as medics rushed to him and unfastened his helmet. "Don't move me," he shouted. "Something is wrong with my spine."

Erban explains: "They took me to Motol Hospital in Prague and sent me to the ICU but they made a mistake – they didn't free my spine. I had crushed two vertebrae but my spinal cord was only compressed, not ruptured. A blood clot had formed and because they left me in that state until the next afternoon, the nerves in my spine died before they could operate."

Erik Gundersen



"With intensive rehabilitation, I got onto crutches and was able to leave the wheelchair behind. The most famous speedway rider and my friend, Ivan Mauger, organised my visit to Dr. Carlo Biagi, a Scottish specialist in cases like mine. He had helped dozens of injured riders return to racing."

Vitek: "After your accident, once you regained mobility, did your attitude towards life and people change?"

"Absolutely," said Erban. "Here's an example. Before, I'd see a car with a handicapped placard and think, 'Oh, someone disabled'. But once I had the placard myself, I became aware of just how many people shared my situation. There's also a shift in mindset. Some handicapped people become selfish, envying others in slightly better condition. I saw this in Kladruhy. I expected us to help each other but most focussed only on themselves. Everyone handles recovery differently."

Erban became one of the most influential people in Czech speedway as a rider-coach and director of the Jawa factory.

"In some ways, the accident was a wake-up call—it pushed me forward," he adds. "I was always thinking about what came next. I don't regret what happened to me. It happened while doing what I loved, and I accepted it that way."

THERE is a third link to speedway in the book, because Vitek and Eva also document the inspirational story of Louise Hunt – the 33-year-old daughter of former Ipswich and Reading rider Tim Hunt.

Louise was born with spina bifida, which meant she never walked. But thanks to significant support from her family and her own courage, ambition and determination, she became an international disabled tennis star, is a world No. 2 at junior level and has competed all over the globe.

As the publisher's blurb states: "Vitek and Eva are motivational writers passionate about sharing stories of resilience, strength and success. With a commitment to empowering others, they have spent years researching and compiling these extraordinary tales to help inspire readers to redefine their own limits."

■ **DEFYING LIMITS: How Extraordinary People Redefine Strength and Success** was published in Jackson, Wyoming, USA by Sastrugi Press and can be bought direct from them at www.sastrugipress.com. Also available in both paperback and eBook format from Amazon at www.amazon.com.