

Ironman's long ride back

Are Kiwis going to dust off the humble bicycle and join the cycling revolution? Mike Wilkinson was one of 751 cyclists injured last year. He tells HELEN TWOSE people should think seriously about their safety.

Ironman is a battle of mental toughness over physical fatigue — 3.8km swim, 180km cycle ride, and a 42km run to finish. Of the 1300 people who entered the New Zealand Ironman at Taupo in March 2005, 184 wouldn't make it over the finish line.

Mike Wilkinson was one of those guys. His Ironman began with a bang two weeks early and it still isn't over.

On Sunday, February 20, the 24-year-old was in the final stages of his preparation for the event. In those last few weeks Wilkinson was maintaining the intensity of his training but the distances were reduced.

That morning Wilkinson was out cycling with regular training partner Ben Schurr. They were on one of their shorter rides, a two-hour pedal that would take

them along Tamaki Drive and around the hills of Auckland's Eastern suburbs. Returning via back streets to avoid road closure on the waterfront, Wilkinson and Schurr were coasting down a gentle hill. They estimate their speed to be between 35km/h and 40km/h.

A van driving towards them slowed, appearing to give the cyclists right of way but at the last minute turned right, across their path. Schurr swerved and caught a glancing blow against the back of the van, spilling from his bike onto the road. Wilkinson, who was riding in front, had no time to react and smashed straight into the passenger side of the van.

According to Ministry of Transport crash statistics, this is one of the most common causes of cycle accidents. Of the 751 cyclists injured last year, 114 were hurt when a vehicle failed to give way and crossed their path from the right. Cars failing to give way at an intersection and pulling out into the path of cyclists is the most common cause of cycle accidents.

The impact against the solid surface of the van left Wilkinson with broken bones in his face, shoulder, vertebrae and hands. Worst of all, as his head thudded against the vehicle, Wilkinson's precious brain ricocheted around in his skull causing serious bruising and injury.

This precious brain had taken him through an honour's degree in economics at Canterbury University and on to a demanding graduate job in investment banking. Work days often stretched into the night.

Wilkinson had returned to eco-



IRONMAN: Mike Wilkinson focusing on recovery after a horror smash.

nomics in 2004, taking up a job with prestigious international economics and finance consultancy CRA International. At the time of the accident he was planning to apply to a university in the United States to complete post-graduate study.

Thirteen days after the crash — Ironman day — Wilkinson lay unconscious in Auckland Hospital. Although he had opened his eyes for the first time five days earlier, Wilkinson was still unable to swallow consistently.

A week later, Wilkinson was transferred to Wellington to be closer to family and receive specialist care at Cavit rehabilitation centre in Hutt Hospital. The next leg of his Ironman began.

Over the following six months until his discharge from hospital on September 9, 2005, Wilkinson re-learned everything he had as a baby — eating, sitting, talking, standing, walking.

Wilkinson has no memory of the crash. He doesn't remember the friend's farewell party he went to the night before. Even

events from 2004 are hazy. His first memory was two months after the accident when he was wheeled to the hospital café for a coffee.

"It's very hazy again, but I can vaguely recall that day so that would be my first memory," he says.

"I can remember everything now, my memory's fine, but my short-term memory is problematic. So I might be told a name or meet someone and be told their name and then ten seconds later I've forgotten it."

Those who knew pre-Ironman Wilkinson may struggle to recognise his voice. There is a slur in his speech. Words sometimes get jumbled. But the familiar timbre is still there — and the intelligent articulation of carefully considered views.

Wilkinson battles with fatigue, a common side effect of brain injuries. He carefully plans his day and schedules breaks to recharge his brain.

"Neuro rests — it's what I call

them, not the medical name. They're just a kind of space-out for half an hour normally. So you just sit and think about nothing for half an hour," says Wilkinson.

"If I do get fatigued, I can keep going but I start acting as if I'm drunk. My talking gets more and more slurred. My walking gets less and less balanced. I guess I become more and more all over the place.

"It's a long way back, I guess. It's not the end and things still improve, but it's a long way back."

The constraints of the fatigue led to frustration at not being able to work full-time so last Christmas he decided to go travelling while his body recovered.

After a "test" trip through Vietnam and Cambodia in May, he began planning his "big OE". In five days time he will be on a plane for South America and the start of "Mike's World Tour".

Wilkinson still plans to complete the Ironman. But he won't be drawn on timeframes. With one head injury he knows he will need to be careful on the bike.

"It wasn't my first scare. I'd had close calls in the past so I wished I hadn't gone out, but I did go out. Being on a city road just seems like an ok thing to do. It didn't feel that dangerous but there's always so much benefit in hindsight."

Wilkinson has some advice for cyclists: "Only ride in town in a bunch of more than three, otherwise ride at home on a wind-trainer."

"Don't bum around on trips through town if you can at all avoid it. Maybe even drive to the outside of town and ride from there."

Eight cyclists have died on NZ roads this year

- **Murray Jessen, 53**
January 15
- **Brent Hazelwood, 46**
January 23
- **Robert Crompton, 57**
January 28
- **Deborah McGifford, 48**
February 19
- **Cody Stevens, 5**
February 28
- **Khan Craven, 11**
June 8
- **Peter Goldsmith, 65**
September 26
- **Johannes Biggelaar, 77**
September 28

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Rob Dickens, 19,
student:

I usually don't need a helmet because I stick to the footpaths. It's all right here on the footpaths of Grafton.



Wowa Schuller, 25,
German tourist,

This city is not very bicycle friendly. In Germany we have bicycle lanes everywhere.



Andrew Taylor, 38,
cycle courier:

I've worked as a cycle courier in London for years and I'd say it was safer here because the level of insanity isn't as high.



Ken Thomas, 51,
semi-retired:

I've been on bikes for years. I like to get out and about, but I haven't crashed since I was a teenager.

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