

*In memoriam*

## The King of the Daredevils

**Robert Craig “Evel” Knievel, 1938–2007**

On November 30, the world lost its most famous daredevil, an American icon who’s widely considered to be the godfather of the extreme sports genre. Robert Craig Knievel passed away in his condominium in Clearwater, Florida. He was 69.

His health had been deteriorating for years. He suffered from diabetes and pulmonary fibrosis, an incurable condition that impaired his breathing. He had also undergone a liver transplant in 1999 after nearly dying of hepatitis C (which he probably contracted through one of the blood transfusions needed during his many reconstructive operations), and he suffered from two strokes since 2005. He lived much longer than the doctors had predicted, given his condition, showing his characteristic toughness right up to the end.

Evel is often mentioned among the most popular sports figures of the ’70s, and is sometimes even put in the same company with Babe Ruth, John Wayne, and Elvis Presley. It’s not difficult to see why he found such resonance with the American public. One could hardly find a more bold and dramatic embodiment of courage and tenacity than this swaggering, caped daredevil in a star-spangled leather jumpsuit who seemed to be a

cross between Captain America and P.T. Barnum. Charismatic, temperamental, and seemingly indestructible, during the height of his career, he captivated the nation.

Born October 17, 1938, in Butte, Montana, Robert Knievel showed his penchant for risk early in this youth when he participated in local professional rodeos and ski-jumping events. (He even won the Northern Rocky Mountain Ski Association Class A Men's ski jumping championship in 1959.) During the late 1950s, he joined the Army, then returned to civilian life in Butte where he met and married his first wife, Linda Joan Bork. He worked a patchwork of various jobs including an insurance salesman, a copper miner, a stock car driver, and a motorcycle salesman before discovering his calling and founding Evel Knievel's Motorcycle Daredevils in the 1960s.

Over the course of his daredevil career, which spanned from 1965 to 1981, he performed hundreds of jumps, including the infamous 1967 Caesars Palace jump where a crash landing sent him into a coma for nearly a month, and the 1974 Snake River Canyon jump, where his rocket-powered X-2 "Skycycle" deployed its parachute too early, which sent him careening into the canyon wall. Four of his nationally televised jumps are among the 20 most-watched *ABC's Wide World of Sports* events of all time.

His crashes generated at least as much publicity as his successes, but they took their toll: He broke about 37 bones, and by the time he quit performing, had undergone 14 major operations. Between 1966 and 1973, he spent more than half of his time in hospitals, recuperating.

His entrepreneurial flair rivaled his showmanship, and his publicity machine generated \$300 million in toy sales alone. He also partnered with Harley-Davidson and helped promote the brand by putting Harleys into two feature-length films and on international television before a sold-out crowd at Wembley Stadium, where he attempted to jump 13 buses.

In 1999, he was inducted into the Motorcycle Hall of Fame, and one of his motorcycles, a modified 1972 Harley-Davidson XR750, is enshrined in the National Museum of American History.

Many of Knievel's records have been broken, but nothing can take away the fact that he pioneered the genre of daredevil motorcycle performance, and left his indelible mark on the history of popular culture.

"It's been coming for years, but you just don't expect it," said Knievel's promoter and longtime friend Billy Rundle, upon hearing of Knievel's death. "Superman just doesn't die, right? I lost a good friend and a guy who was like a father to me."

"Evel Knievel jumping the iconic Caesars Palace fountains is one of the most memorable sports moments in history and set the stage for Caesars Palace to be the home of champions for years to come," said Caesars Palace President Gary Selesner. "He was a daredevil's daredevil, and a gentlemen with a heart of gold. Our thoughts and prayers go out to his family and friends."

“He was a great man and there will never be another like him again,” said Darren Prince, Knievel’s marketing agent. “I feel honored to have worked with him and hope that America remembers him as not just a stuntman but as an American icon who put his heart and soul into entertaining us.”

Mr. Prince can rest assured that Knievel will be remembered as exactly that.