

BMX athlete Tony Hoffman gets back on the bike

Substance use took the promising BMX career of Tony Hoffman off course, but a spiritual journey in recovery has him back on the bike, both figuratively and literally, and he's now riding in new directions as a coach and motivational speaker.

By his senior year of high school, Hoffman was nationally ranked in BMX. He appeared on magazine covers and had endorsement deals for sunglasses, shoes and more. But in spite of his burgeoning fame, Hoffman says he struggled with depression, anxiety and low self-esteem, issues that had plagued him since junior high.

"Those were the underlying factors that led me to my experimentation with smoking marijuana," says Hoffman, 34, who resides in Clovis, Calif. "Once I got into smoking weed, that felt good and I liked it. I wanted to experiment with other things as they came along. When you get involved in something like that, you think, 'It will never be something else. It will just be this.' But then, the more parties you go to, you start to see other things and friends start trying things. Then, you find out, 'Wow, this drug works better than the weed does.'"

Hoffman says he moved on to cocaine and then prescription painkillers. His substance use helped with his feelings of anxiety and depression, if only temporarily, but they also led to him eventually being kicked out of a friend's home where he was staying in 2006. The first night Hoffman spent on the street homeless was his lowest moment, he says.

On Jan. 21, 2007, Hoffman says he was welcomed into a church and was told by a pastor that God would forgive his transgressions. Still, that night, Hoffman broke into a house up for rent. The next day, real estate agents planning to show the property found him passed out on the floor. The break-in was a parole violation—Hoffman previously was convicted on charges of home invasion and robbery in 2005—and he was sentenced to four-and-a-half years in prison, where, he says, his spiritual journey began.

"God told me four directions in which He wanted me to take my life," Hoffman says. "One, get back on my bicycle and race BMX. Two, He was going to take me to the Olympics. Three, He wanted me to become a public speaker. And four, He wanted me to start a program for kids using my bike."

Hoffman was released on Dec. 13, 2008, and by the following May, he was competing in a lower level professional BMX class. He won five races in 2009, despite having not touched a bike in seven years. Hoffman began speaking publicly in 2010. In 2012, he launched the Freewheel Project, a not-for-profit youth action sports initiative.

Hoffman's BMX riding career ended in 2011 with a knee injury, but he transitioned into coaching, working with several BMX athletes before guiding racing cyclist Brooke Crain to the Olympics in 2016.

Hoffman, meanwhile, has maintained his sobriety by staying disciplined, developing microprocesses to complete tasks—"master a lot of little things that, over time, would become big things that created successful moments like going to the Olympics," he says.

"Meetings are important. Church is important. Meditation is important. Giving back is important. Admitting when you're wrong is important. Not always needing to be right is important," he says. "Simple things."

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