



## For St. Augustine motocross star **Ashley Fiolek**, life's speedbumps are just moguls waiting to be conquered **By Kara Pound**. Photos by Walter Coker

**R**acing around the dirt track behind her parents' house in St. Augustine, Ashley Fiolek revs her red Honda 250Fcc racing bike to almost 40 mph. After hard rains on Friday, this Monday morning finds a messy landscape — muddy in some spots, dry in others — so Fiolek slows and sputters around the corners only to gun it on the straightaways. She takes the large jumps with ease, twisting the front wheel to anticipate a hard landing and set herself up for the next stretch of track.

Fiolek is the No. 1 female motocross racer in the United States, two years running. Despite a history of broken bones, including her collarbone (twice), wrist (twice), a knocked-out front tooth, broken nose and ankle, this 5'2", 110-pound 19-year-old has no desire to quit. And though she's never heard the roar of her motorcycle or the competition coming up behind her — she's been deaf since birth — Fiolek says her game has never been about limits.

Sitting on the bed of her red Ford F150 pickup at her parents' 10-acre home off C.R. 208, decked out in gear decorated with "AF67" (her racing moniker) and Honda and Red Bull logos — her two biggest sponsors — Fiolek says being deaf isn't something she thinks a lot about.



"You know, my mom and dad just raised me to be normal like any other kid," she rapidly signs to her mom, Roni, who acts as translator. "I just couldn't hear — that's kinda how they brought me up. Sometimes I even forget about it."

Though motocross is sometimes perceived as a hearing sport — one in which riders need to listen to their bikes and competitors to gain advantage — Fiolek says she's found her own way to compete, by listening to vibrations. And though she's not yet a household name on the order of Shaun White or Tony Hawk, she is the darling of the motocross world. After going pro in 2007, she went on to become the youngest female to win the American Women's Motocross Championship — something she repeated in 2009. She's also the first woman in American motocross history to be signed to a factory team, Honda Red Bull Racing. Last year, she won her first X-Games gold and was nominated for an ESPN ESPY Award for Best Female Action Sports Athlete and in May, she placed second

in the opening race of the season, the Rockstar Energy Hangtown Classic in Sacramento. She's been written about in *The New York Times*, *Rolling Stone*, *USA Today* and *Cosmo Girl*. She even released a memoir this past April.

But Fiolek isn't just a motocross star with an incidental disability. In many ways, her ability and her deafness are inexorably intertwined, tracking from her infancy like a double helix. Although her skill as a rider initially developed despite her deafness, she ultimately chose to remain profoundly deaf in order to pursue the sport she loves.

**M**otocross is basically cross-country racing on motorcycles. In fact, the name "motocross" is a hybrid of the words. It's thought to have originated in France, but the sport's popularity took off in Great Britain in the 1920s and '30s. There wasn't much of a fan base in the United States, since the large tracks made it difficult for spectators to follow the action. But in 1972, America birthed "Supercross," its own version of motocross

usually hereditary, but because there was no known family history, doctors believe it may have been caused by in-utero exposure to German measles.

Fiolek credits her parents with working to make sure her deafness didn't make her feel different, but she admits she wasn't always the bubbly, confident girl she is today. Before motocross, she was actually pretty shy. She didn't have a lot of friends, and spent most of her time around her parents and her little brother, Kicker (now 6, named after the motocross term for a short jump that's notorious for bucking off riders over the handlebars). "I was afraid to go anywhere or do anything," she explains.

Motocross helped build her confidence. The Fioleks say she showed no fear, even as a child — racing through a wooded forest or down a steep hill. But the sport also demanded an early and dramatic commitment from Fiolek. For years, doctors urged her parents to fit their daughter with cochlear implants, a surgically implanted device that provides a sense of sound to a person who is profoundly



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housed in stadiums, which was easily televised and quickly became a popular sport.

About 20 years later, on Oct. 22, 1990, Fiolek was born in Dearborn Heights, Mich., a small suburb of Detroit defined by car manufacturing plants and automotive jobs. GM, Chrysler and Ford are all headquartered near there, and the fumes of the nearby Motor City must have been contagious. Fiolek's father, Jim, and grandfather, affectionately known as "Grandpa Motorcycle," were both avid riders. Although they raced at a time when the only women at the track were there to wipe off a man's helmet, they always encouraged Fiolek that she could hold her own in the male-dominated sport. In fact, almost as soon as she could walk, Fiolek's parents put her on a motorcycle with training wheels.

Around the same time, they were growing concerned that Ashley wasn't talking yet. They took her to a local hospital for tests, where a child specialist evaluated her intelligence and hand-eye coordination, but apparently didn't think to test her hearing. Because little Ashley couldn't hear the test instructions, the doctor labeled her "mildly retarded." Roni rejected the diagnosis. She suspected the problem was not with her daughter's brain, but with her hearing. One day, she dropped an armload of pots and pans. When the girl didn't flinch, her mother was convinced she was right.

Doctors eventually confirmed it — Fiolek had been born profoundly deaf. Deafness is

deaf. The implants are effective — more so if used early — but they aren't perfect. They also seriously limit the amount of contact sports in which the wearer can participate. For Fiolek, the choice came down to implants or motocross. When the girl was just eight, Roni and Jim decided against the implants. She wouldn't ever be able to hear, but she would be able to keep doing what she loved.

**F**iolek's first big win, in the 2004 Loretta Lynn Amateur National Motocross Championships in Hurricane Mills, Tenn., was a turning point in her life and her career. It solidified her belief that she could accomplish anything, mostly because before that, people didn't even realize she was deaf. "People were shocked [when they learned], and then a lot of them started learning sign language, so then I just felt like more myself and I started gaining confidence," she says. "Motocross made me be confident."

The family's decision to forego cochlear implants meant that they needed to prioritize sign language-based education. When Fiolek was in third grade, the family decided to move to St. Augustine. In part, they chose the city because it's home to the Florida School for the Deaf and the Blind. But they also chose it for motocross. "In Michigan, it was cold in the winter," says Fiolek. "I decided I



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could ride all year here. I could be here to socialize with the deaf and be a part of the deaf culture, but I could also ride all the time.”

In the end, sport took precedence over schooling. In ninth grade, around the time Fiolek’s motocross career started taking off, she had to leave FSDB because she was missing too much school. A few years later, she graduated from high school through home-schooling. But despite her nontraditional path, she doesn’t find it difficult to communicate with her hearing friends or boyfriends. She’s a good lip-reader, and many of her friends have learned sign language. She also speaks. “Once my friends have been around me for a long time, they get used to my voice,” she signs to her mom while moving her lips and producing sounds according to how her mouth is shaped. “I know it’s not like regular speech, but I haven’t really had a hard time. Like if I’m really stuck, I’ll use my phone and I’ll text and show people or I’ll write something down, but it’s never really been a problem.”

One of Fiolek’s best friends, Brittany Sharp, met the motocross champ in 2005 when she found her instant message screen name in a magazine, sent her a message and the two became fast Internet friends. A few months later, they met up in person (Sharp lives in Michigan and Fiolek was there visiting her grandparents) and have been inseparable ever since. “She is basically like my sister — I tell her everything and trust her completely,” Sharp says. “She is determined and never lets anything stand in her way. She is always smiling and has a positive, upbeat attitude that is almost contagious. I mean, you can’t help but smile when you’re around her.”

Fiolek is polite, and happy to answer questions, but she’s also antsy to get on the track. The 19-year-old talks to the press almost every day. Besides all the many print interviews she’s done for national publications, she’s got a millennial teenager’s ease in front of the camera. Fuel TV, an action sports cable channel, recently followed her around for two weeks — everywhere from New York to California to St. Augustine. She considers the coverage part of her job, just like the year-round travel.

“My second home is the airport,” she says. “During the season, it’s crazy, I travel all the time. I’m only home like a few times a month.” Despite Fiolek’s schedule, she’s looking to sink deeper local roots. She’s buying her first home — a four-bedroom short sale about a mile away in Whisper Ridge, a subdivision in Northwest St. Johns County. It’s close enough that she can still ride on her track and ask her mom for help with cleaning and cooking — two things, she admits, she knows nothing about.

With the motocross world and press out in California and ideal track conditions in Texas, some have wondered why Fiolek remains in St. Augustine. She could live virtually anywhere in the country or at least closer to a major airport and her good friends. “Honestly, this feels like home,” she says. “It’s familiar and I love being near my family.” In her time off, which isn’t very often, Fiolek is doing what a lot of typical teenagers do — snowboarding, wakeboarding, Tweeting (@ashleyfiolek67), going to restaurants and hanging with her bulldog, Turbo. She also writes a monthly column called “Silence” in *TransWorld Motocross* magazine, which she credits with improving her speech.

Finally excused from the interview, Fiolek



# DEAF DEFYING

heads to the track. Without her smile leaving her face, she suits up in pounds of leather and plastic protective gear, signs with her new full-time mechanic, Kyle (through her mom, since he hasn't learned sign language yet), and charges the first jump with ease.

Standing under a canopy of shade, Roni continues to sign even after her daughter's left. "Yeah, I do it a lot," she laughs when it's brought to her attention. "Especially when I talk about Ashley."

Watching Fiolek race around the track behind her parents' house, it's hard not to be impressed by the teenager's skill. Though most riders rely on hearing to stay aware of other riders, Fiolek believes her deafness is actually an asset. "I have to hold my line when I'm racing," she explains. "Sometimes people move all around and I can't do that. I have to make sure nobody's behind me, so I think I'm probably safer than most people."

Still, accidents happen. Last year, in the last race of the 2009 motocross season at Steel City in Delmont, Penn., Fiolek only needed to finish in 11th place or higher and she would win the championship. She was in second place when she hit an unexpected rut, losing control and then losing her bike. She slammed into the ground and felt a searing pain across her shoulder. Doctors would later determine she'd torn a muscle and broken her collarbone. But instead of lying there and waiting for the EMT team to load her onto a stretcher, she got up, lifted her 200-plus-pound motorcycle, and rode it across the finish line. She came in seventh place and was the women's motocross champion of 2009.

"It was kind of freaky," her mom admits. "The hard thing about when they have a crash like that is, you can't really do anything. You're supposed to just leave them. Your initial reaction is to run over to your kid and pick them up." Fiolek got up on her own that time, but the entire family understands the danger involved in professional motocross. Sometimes, the danger is what gets ratings. A month before Fiolek's 2009 championship win, she was considering competing in the X-Games in Los Angeles, a three-day event known for breaking extreme sports figures into the mainstream as well as breaking their bones — athletes try to master their most daring tricks in front of millions of viewers. Now that she was part of a factory team (meaning a paid employee), Fiolek wasn't sure if Honda would allow her to compete and risk injury in the middle of a championship season. She was ultimately given the green light by her sponsors, and dominated the track — bringing home gold in the women's Moto X Super X.

"People that become professionals — it's your job, but it's something you love to do," says Fiolek. "You can get hurt — people even die, so you have to make sure it's something you love to do."

Increasingly, Fiolek has set her sights on breaking a new barrier — by becoming the first female to qualify with the men. She's not yet sure what her boss, Honda, will think. Company officials might see it as a reckless move and question why she should risk injury and another championship win just to make history. Or they may find the attraction of a cute teenage girl at the starting line along with 29 guys an irresistible bit of PR. She's hoping it's the latter, but regardless of their take, she's determined to try.

"Life's too short," Fiolek says matter-of-factly. "I can do it." □