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The Noise and the Boys

Pauil Kix
Iowa State University

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DES MOINES, Iowa — Monster trucks and flying bikes. Two attractions you would think would fit nicely together. They do, as far as the audience is concerned. But the actual participants are as different as night and day.

THE NOISE

Ear plugs. That's what you had better bring. Because when the time for toeing the starting line is over and the signal to race is given, this 2,000 horsepower monster truck engine is gunned. The mighty roar that momentarily shakes the frame of the truck numbs the ears with its piercing thunder if earplugs are not properly applied. It is easy to tell when they are not.

Away from the 11-foot tall behemoths, near the concession stands of Veterans Memorial Auditorium, parents lead around the children who begged them to buy tickets to this thing called Monster Jam. Below the uplifted hand that is grasping Mom or Dad is the child's face. And the face gives it away. It looks pale, sick. But it is not sick. It is bewildered and probably a bit scared that the thing it was looking forward to is so hard to actually sit through. The noise is big and the arena is small. Without protection from this gratuitous, ostentatious sound, it is better to take a break from it, walk by the concession stands and wait for the red to leave the eyes.

Back in Vets, now that the piercing roar is gone, the crews of the behemoths and some of the drivers sneak the trucks. They will soon race against each other, jumping over half-smashed luxury sedans from the '70s. Racing fans loved the smashing. Then came the Bartle of the Monster Trucks two years later and the USHRA's first monster truck racing series — Monster Jam — in 1987. Since then, some of the better-known trucks, like Bigfoot, Gravedigger and Goldberg, have become quite prof-
Why race a bike when you can ramp it off a big-ass hill, do a cartwheel while in flight and land without breaking any ribs?

For many, monster truck racing is the ultimate in thrill-seeking. But for the FMX (stunt dirt bike riding) riders, it's a different breed of motor cross, a breed nurtured in the womb of adventure. Why race a bike when you can ramp it off a big-ass hill, do a cartwheel while in flight and land without breaking any ribs?

According to Travis Willis, one of the FMX riders, "If you don't hit the landing, you're pretty much fucked." Willis says, adding that fearlessness is basically a prerequisite when you're 50 feet in the air, and you let go of the object that got you there. "If you don't hit the landing, you're pretty much fucked," Willis says.

Because they are young and enjoy defying gravity, the FMX riders don't like the rules the tour has imposed on them. Baseball caps must be worn either forward or backward — not skewed slightly to the side like rappers or perpendicular to the head like punk rockers. "Can you believe that shit?" asks one rider with black spiked hair and a choker necklace with menacing points jutting out.

"That's the politics of it. You gotta play their game."

Willis has been listening to the disdain and chin in. He does not like the rules, and he especially doesn't like Des Moines. "I don't know how the fuck I ended up here. Here you got to deal with mullet kings and mullet queens." Having bad taste is clearly worse than having controlled tutes.

If there are other guidelines on the Monster Jam Series that the FMX riders don't like, they don't mention it on that Saturday afternoon because a man with headphones around his neck steps in and says more autographs must be signed. No one wants to go. Willis knows he has to.

After that, there are two shows to ramp bikes in. "The best is making money and not getting hurt. That's the best," Willis says. Money is made, in part, by jumping well. The promoter then decides who goes to the final round and who, ultimately, wins the day.

"How many people can say 'I honestly like my job?'" Willis says.

Paul Kie is a junior in journalism and mass communication. He is a senior editor for Ethos.