

# FULLY ALIVE

INJURED MARINE LIVES HIS 'MIRACLE' OF A DREAM IN CONTINENTAL TIRE SERIES

BY STEVEN COLE SMITH

**Q** MILITARY VETERANS WHO suffer a serious combat injury and survive call the date of the catastrophic event their "alive day."

That would be May 22, 2011 for U.S. Marine Staff Sgt. Liam Dwyer, who was on a search team in Afghanistan when he stepped on an explosive. It severed his left leg above the knee and badly hurt an arm.

If that was his "alive day," he isn't quite sure what to call May 2, 2015. "A miracle," he offered, or "a dream come true."

Dwyer's longtime love has been auto racing, and he refused to give up on his dream. Fitted with a special prosthesis that replaces his leg, he returned to the track, where he adapted to the special equipment his car required, mostly just a clip that attached his prosthesis to the clutch. He drove hard, and fast, and it did not go unnoticed.

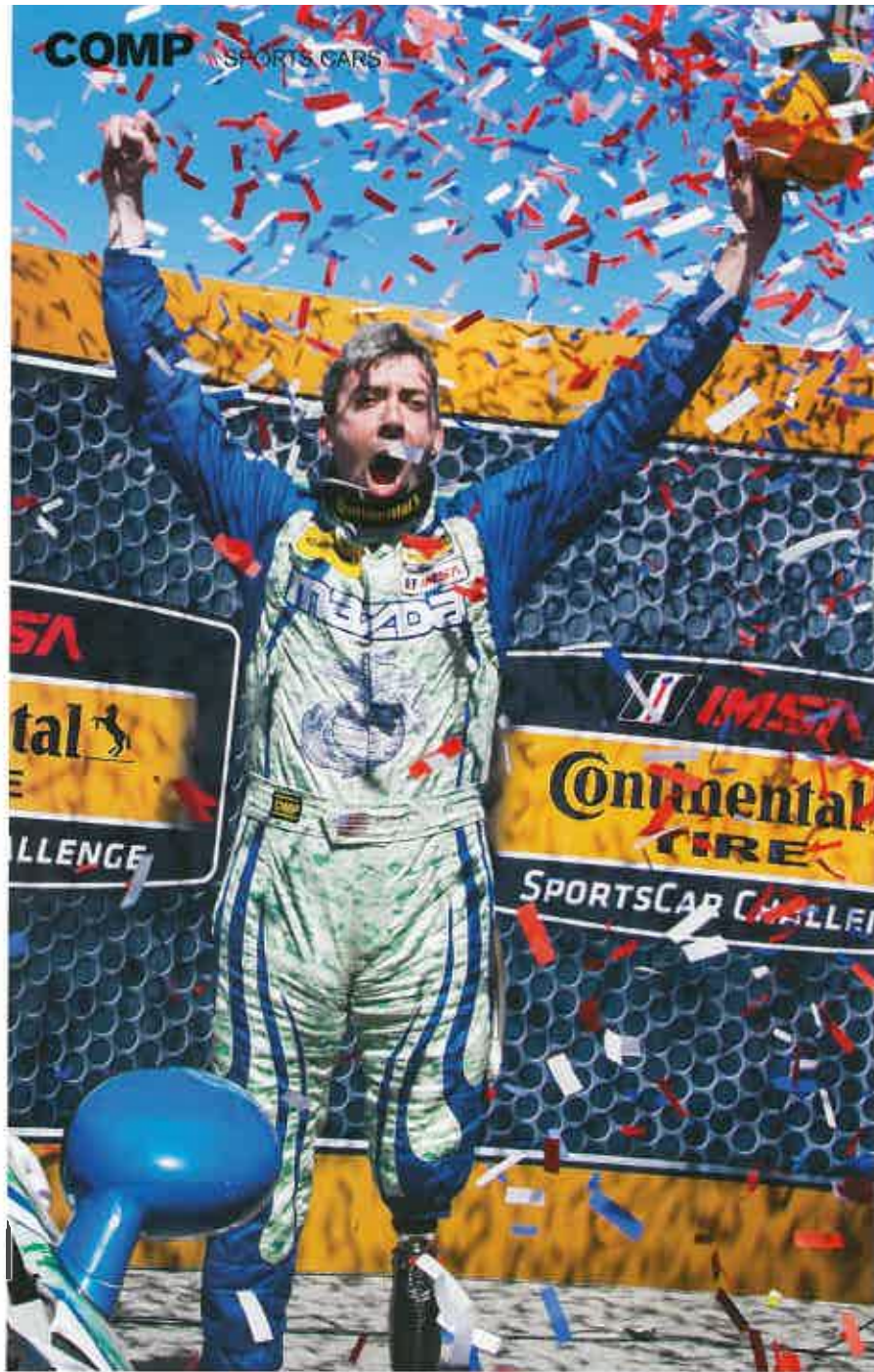
Last year, Dwyer joined a Mazda-backed team, Freedom Autosport, that fields Mazda MX-5 Miatas in the Continental Tire SportsCar Challenge, a tough series that holds endurance races requiring at least two drivers. Last year, Dwyer and his then-teammate, Mazda factory driver Tom Long, won at Lime Rock Park in Connecticut.

"It was amazing," Dwyer said. "I didn't think anything could top that emotion."

But on May 2, something did.

On the very last lap of a two-hour, 30-minute, 84-lap race at Mazda Raceway Laguna Seca, Dwyer's driving partner, Andrew Carbonell, passed the Freedom Autosport Mazda MX-5 driven by Tom Long, Dwyer's old driving partner. Carbonell and Dwyer, who drove the first portion of the race, took the victory, defeating 27 other entries in the ST class.

The difference this year? It wasn't so much the win, it was who came to Mazda Raceway to witness it. Dwyer very possibly would have died that day in Afghanistan had it not been for another Marine sergeant, Aaron Denning, who rushed to Dwyer's aid and performed lifesaving procedures, first by







LAT PHOTOGRAPHIC (3); MAZDA MOTORSPORTS (2)

staunching the bleeding in his leg and arm, then by picking up the injured soldier and carrying him more than 100 yards to the evacuation helicopter.

While the two sergeants, both still in the Marines—Denning on the West Coast, Dwyer on the East Coast—stayed in touch, Denning had never seen Dwyer race. That changed when he not only attended the Continental Tire Challenge race but was an honored guest who waved the green flag to start the race. Dwyer's mother was also at the track—she had never met the man who saved her son's life.

And to see Dwyer not only race, but win? "It's like a fairy tale," said Denning, trying hard to hold back tears. "Liam Dwyer is the living, breathing embodiment of a man who was knocked down and got back up. I'm honored to be here, and I'm honored to be his friend."

Denning, incidentally, will retire from the military this year, as will Dwyer. And he has his own comeback story that few at the track knew. While Dwyer was state-side, in the hospital, Denning was still serving overseas. He was a turret gunner on a truck when it ran over a very large explosive device. "He was lucky to come out of that alive," Dwyer said. Denning suffered brain injuries and only through a lot of therapy was he able to come back. He received the Bronze Star for his actions in



Marines Aaron Denning and Liam Dwyer, top left, served together in Afghanistan; Dwyer celebrates with teammate Andrew Carbonell at the Monterey GP; Dwyer gets ready to roll.

2011 that saved Dwyer's life.

As for Dwyer, 33, his story is even more remarkable than most of his fans know. In 2007, four years before Dwyer's alive day, he was serving in Iraq when his Humvee was hit by a roadside bomb. He took shrapnel on the left side of his body. He left the military and returned to civilian life—and then he re-enlisted. It was on his second tour when he was almost killed in Afghanistan.

Would he do it all over again? We don't even get the question out before Dwyer is

nodding. "I loved being a Marine. It was my dream profession. To go off and be a part of what the Marines do—it was truly a rewarding experience that I will never be able to duplicate the rest of my life. This racing, as special as it is, can't duplicate the feeling I got from being in the military.

"I've been blessed to be good at two jobs that I really loved doing. I love being a Marine, which is something I knew I always wanted to do, and I love driving a race car. Not many people can say they worked at two dream jobs in one lifetime."

As expected, Dwyer was humble after the victory, giving credit to co-driver Carbonell, to his team, to Mazda and, of course, to Marine Sgt. Aaron Denning. "I don't have words for the emotion," he said. "I'm just so proud to be part of this team."

He will be for the foreseeable future: Racing will become his full-time job, along with the motivational speaking that he is very good at, with a message to anyone who gets knocked down and has trouble getting back up. He and Carbonell are third in the points standings, and they'll be racing in the next Continental Tire Challenge event at the end of June at Watkins Glen.

"So many of us are faced with adversity," he said. "Your problems may not be as obvious as mine, but they can be just as devastating. But I'm proof there's light at the end of a very long, dark tunnel." 🌟