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Once a prized prospect in the motocross world, Austin Stroupe fell into the abyss of addiction and has paid a terrible toll, both in his career and his life

WORDS: **BRETT SMITH**
PHOTOS: **ANDREW FREDRICKSON**

WITH AN ARMLOAD OF RIDING GEAR, broken knee braces, and a dirty helmet and boots, Austin Stroupe wanders the narrow hallways of Baltimore's Royal Farms Arena looking for a place to change. It's mid-January 2016, and he's almost anonymous; nobody asks for his autograph, nobody does double takes, and only a few people even acknowledge recognizing the top amateur prospect from a decade ago, a rider once expected to win championships at the highest level of supercross and motocross. In February 2012, nearly forty-

eight months ago—the same amount of time you might take to pay off an entire auto loan—Stroupe broke his collarbone in practice at the Dallas SX and disappeared from racing, abandoning contracts with a combined worth of \$250,000. His departure was so abrupt, he even left his gear bag behind. He has only been on a motorcycle a few times since, but last summer he set a goal to race again in the new year. On January 1, riding a borrowed YZ250, Stroupe lined up for the pro classes at an indoor race in Asheville, North Carolina.

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wo weeks later, he's in Baltimore. Practice starts in thirty minutes, and he just saw the bike he'll be riding for the weekend, a Kawasaki

KX250F. When he rolls out for the first practice at round two of Amsoil Arenacross, it will be the third different motorcycle he's ridden in the past six days. He finds Tyler McSwain, a hometown friend with whom he drove 450 miles from North Carolina late the night before. He asks McSwain if the hotel has a laundry room, because he doesn't have an extra outfit for the second day of racing. McSwain shrugs; Stroupe plops his gear down on the concrete steps.

What started as a return to racing after four slow but tumultuous and complicated years quickly escalated into a mountain of expectations and unintended pressure for Stroupe. On February 13 in Birmingham, Alabama, within six weeks of the low-key event in Asheville, Stroupe competed on a Husqvarna FC 250—specifically, the

race bike of Kyle Regal, the defending AX champion who was absent with an injury. Stroupe finished on the podium, and interview requests picked up, sponsors called, fans expressed excitement on social feeds, and soon a contract sat on his mother's desk waiting to be signed. "This kid has enough talent to come in and dominate arenacross," Husqvarna team manager Junior Jackson said.

An observer might expect someone like Stroupe—a gifted rider and former 250-class winner in both Monster Energy Supercross and Lucas Oil Pro Motocross—to easily slide back into contention and enjoy the return to competition. Internally, however, Stroupe was imploding. He wasn't mentally prepared for the pressure of the role. He was still trying to figure out how to be comfortable with the smallest logistics of being a professional racer again—the routines, the travel, the training, etc.

The comeback ended as quickly as it had escalated. In the small hours of March 10, Stroupe was pulled over





A dozen years ago, North Carolina's Austin Stroupe was making a name for himself as one of the country's fastest minicycle riders. He won four AMA Amateur National Championships at Loretta Lynn's Ranch.

along Route 74 in Union County, North Carolina, and arrested on six charges, the most severe of which was heroin possession, a felony. He spent twelve days in jail before being bonded out by his mother, Ann. His day in court is April 26—the day this magazine goes to print.

To explain what happened in the span of nine weeks in 2016 requires an understanding of the last nine years. It's

a story Austin has agreed to share for the first time, and it starts in Baltimore.

The Hard Line

Austin Lee Stroupe, twenty-five, of Lincolnton, North Carolina, is a recovering drug addict. Before his arrest on March 10, he had been clean since the previous February. That thirteen-month stretch was the longest he'd been off drugs since 2010, but it started in the fall of '08 with a broken collarbone before his sophomore professional season. At the time, he was only seventeen, and although he took the medicine exactly as prescribed, there was something about it he liked.

"I knew that something was funny when I was taking them," he says. "I enjoyed being in that feeling."

Pain medications, especially opiates, "hijack the brain," says Dr. Cali Estes of The Addictions Coach. "They make every pleasure sensor

in your brain ping at once. The high from opiates is like gambling, having sex, and laying in a bed of roses at the same time."

Stroupe let the collarbone heal, switched to the 250SX East Region for 2009, and finished second overall to his Pro Circuit Kawasaki teammate Christophe Pourcel.

It wasn't until 2010 that he began taking more pain medication than was recommended for a young man of his size, slightly under 5'8" and weighing 150 lbs. That year, as Ryan Dungey's Suzuki teammate, Stroupe was once again in the hunt for the 250SX Eastern Regional Championship, again with Pourcel, whom he trailed by eight points coming into the penultimate round in Houston on April 10. Three weeks prior, however, he'd suffered a broken left thumb in Dallas. A doctor prescribed him Vicodin. In the time between Dallas and Houston, Stroupe finished second at Jacksonville. Away from the track, he was taking four to five pills at a time.

"I was still training, but I was abusing the pills that they were giving me," he says. In Houston he landed on Kyle Cunningham and tore ligaments in his right bicep and the rotator cuff in his right shoulder. He attributes the crash to not being focused, admitting, "It is karma, and I think that happened for a reason, and I wasn't clear-headed."

Stroupe underwent a two-and-a-half-hour surgery in Charlotte. Nineteen years old





In 2008 both Stroupe (51) and Ryan Dungey (28) were vying for wins in the West Region of AMA Supercross. Both won races, though the title ultimately went to Yamaha of Troy's Jason Lawrence, a friend of Stroupe's—and Dungey's bitter rival.

CUDBY

at the time, he hadn't had idle time at home in five years; he'd been living in California since 2007. Instead of concentrating on rehabilitating his shoulder, he focused on fun, his girlfriend, and old (and new) acquaintances.

"After my medicine ran out, I was quickly introduced to meeting the wrong people and partying, and I was out of control," he says. "I had money, a Cadillac CTS, had a girlfriend. I could be anywhere, I was everywhere. I was able to get [pills] on a daily basis and go through them and just abuse them every day."

Even before the prescription from the shoulder surgery ran out after two months, Stroupe had found

sources for more opioid pain medication—\$10 per pill—and bought twenty or thirty every four or five days. Once the pills started coming from the street, he says a close friend showed him how to crush and snort them, which allows the psychoactive agent to enter the bloodstream more quickly and creates a euphoric high. Overdose risks increase greatly with an increased tolerance.

One of Stroupe's biggest regrets from that summer is traveling with friends to the Budds Creek National on June 19. There, Stroupe wandered the facility, being seen yet trying to avoid people at the same time. Not once did he stop and say hello to his team manager, Roger

DeCoster—a move that caused his relationship with the Suzuki boss to go south.

"I was just there acting like everything was fine, and I was really out of my mind and not really right," Stroupe admits.

A few weeks later he crashed riding a BMX bike and reinjured the shoulder but didn't have surgery. He didn't ride a motorcycle from April 10 until the end of October. Todd Stroupe noticed that his son was getting thinner in mid-2010. Even when Austin showed up at the house to drive to New Jersey with Jason Lawrence—a rider who spent three and a half months in the Murrieta, California's Southwest Detention Center in 2009 on charges in-

cluding two counts of assault with a deadly weapon—Todd said he was "devastated" but "Austin never gave me any reason to doubt him."

The Wasteland

In November of 2010, Stroupe signed with Valli Motorsports Yamaha, but by the end of December he still wasn't ready. He showed up to round one on January 8, set the fifteenth-fastest lap time, and withdrew before the heat races. At round three he made the main and finished twelfth. Through it all, he was living with his girlfriend, 2,400 miles away from his parents in Irvine, California. She had access to Adderall and muscle relaxers, which Stroupe also abused.





Weeks later, Stroupe sprained an ankle practicing. His doctor prescribed him Norcos, an opioid with acetaminophen and hydrocodone. He went to Atlanta to attempt to race but didn't even make it to the first seeding session—he'd spent the previous night drinking and "out of control." The next morning, he was sent home and fined \$10,000 by the team.

"We knew there were some issues," Valli Motorsports team owner Chad Lanza says when asked why he decided to hire Stroupe. "But we knew [Austin] had the ability to ride a motorcycle like most people can't."

That midseason moment jolted Stroupe, and he returned at round eleven and finished the year with four top-ten finishes in the final seven races, including a season-best seventh in Vegas, despite reinjuring his already tender shoulder. Instead of heeding team advice and going home and steering clear of the Vegas nightlife, Stroupe started drinking as he left the stadium and went on a two-day Adderall-cocaine-and-vodka bender.

The following Tuesday he was back in surgery for his shoulder. More pain-pill abuse led to a broken back (T6/7) at Pala Raceway in mid-July, an injury Stroupe credits to being "messed up in the head." He burned through his prescribed 120 Percocets in a week.

"I remember going through 90 Percs in three days," he says. "Second

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week I was down at my doctor asking him to give me more." He was given a generic brand that wasn't as strong, but he found a way to obtain OxyContin on the street. Austin's mother flew to California to spend time with him. That's when she first realized there was a problem. She could see it in his eyes.

Later that summer, Valli re-signed Stroupe—a move that, even today, surprises him. After healing from his back injury, he got clean and started training.

"We signed a deal to where I was actually testing with factory Yamaha, and things were unbelievably good," Stroupe says. Lanza concurs, mentioning how enthusiastic the team (and Yamaha) was.

"But a week before Anaheim, a different Austin showed up," Lanza says. "He was pale. The following weeks were bad."

On December 31, 2011—a week before the opener—Stroupe met two girls at a gas station near his home in Canyon Lake, California. They wanted to party, and Austin anticipated a social night of drinking at home. When one of them said she had a source for pain pills, "I'm pretty sure I jumped right to it," Stroupe says. They picked up the dealer, and the group rang in the new year

under the influence of Roxy 30s—30mg tablets of Roxycodone, an opioid analgesic designed to provide immediate release of oxycodone. Following the party, Stroupe got the dealer's number and says he started meeting him to purchase Roxy 30s at \$30 each. Stroupe estimates he snorted six to nine pills a day during this period.

He failed to qualify for a single main event in 2012, but his Fast 40 seeding times were mostly within the top fifteen. Despite being frustrated with his own actions, Stroupe's derailment only got worse through January: he tried heroin with a different acquaintance in Canyon Lake, and his roommate, Hunter Hewitt, moved out, leaving Stroupe upset; he says they were good friends. "So that opened up drug use even more," he adds.

Hewitt, a 250SX East racer at the time, says he was not present for the New Year's Eve party and adds that he never witnessed Austin "do a gnarly drug," meaning anything beyond smoking marijuana. But Hewitt wasn't happy with the constant flow of Stroupe's friends and acquaintances through the house. "That's the reason I bounced," Hewitt says. "I was trying to not be around that stuff."



After missing four years of racing, Stroupe did some local arenacross races this past winter. Junior Jackson's Rockstar Energy Husqvarna team then tapped him for a fill-in ride in Amsoil Arenacross.

KOY

Soon after Hewitt's departure, Stroupe asked his dealer to move in. He then suffered a concussion practicing at Milestone MX while under the influence. He missed rounds three through five and went home to North Carolina to get away. When he came back, his team attempted to have him drug-tested, bringing forth a stream of profanities from the rider. Stroupe says he prolonged the concussion recovery and acted like it was worse than it was. He finally returned to racing on February 11 in San Diego. Lanza remembers a "starry look" in his eyes.

"I honestly didn't know if it was the concussion, if he was milking it—all I knew

was that something was wrong with him," Lanza says. He asked Stroupe if he was okay. "I'm fine, I'm fine," was Austin's reply.

After popping two 30mg Roxycodone tablets, Stroupe seeded into the night program of the San Diego Supercross in seventeenth place. "That was the only race I've ever been high at, that I used," Stroupe says. He estimates he took four to five pills throughout the day. In heat number two he was eighth on the final lap—a transfer position in 2012—when he inexplicably stalled in the whoops. He finished twelfth and didn't start the last-chance qualifier.

Lanza didn't watch.

Instead, he waited at the Asterisk Mobile Medical Unit; he knew that's where his rider would end up. Stroupe arrived with vomit covering his jersey and bike. It was the last checkered flag he would see until January 1, 2016; one week later, he broke his collarbone.

Less than two months beyond his twenty-first birthday, Austin Stroupe was gone. He was still younger than Jeremy McGrath, Ricky Carmichael, Chad Reed, James Stewart, and Ryan Villopoto were when they won their first 450SX championships.

The Phone Call

On March 10, 2016, Todd Stroupe hung up the phone. The recording on the other

line asked if he wanted to accept a collect call on behalf of an inmate, and he declined. Then he walked to his computer to visit the website of the Union County Sheriff's Office to see for himself.

For years Todd has worried about getting the phone call—the one informing him that his son has overdosed and is either in an emergency room or dead. America is in an opioid epidemic; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention research shows that seventy-eight Americans die every day from an opioid overdose. And opioids have been leading to heroin.

Todd was relieved this wasn't the phone call, but also crushed to learn that his



(From left) Runner-up Jace Owen, winner Jacob Hayes, and third-place Stroupe (below) shared the Birmingham AX podium in February. Three weeks later, Stroupe was in a North Carolina jail.



son was in jail—again. The last four years have been stressful for the family; their house burned down in 2013, they closed a restaurant in December 2014 that they'd spent four years building, and Austin was living with them, battling addiction and the problems that come with it.

Austin's mother, Ann, says she nearly gave up; she wanted to move away and never look back. That was July 2012, and the stress Austin brought to the family was affecting her and Todd's health. Ann says that someone gave her some important advice: "You are his parent. If you give up, he will have no one." She reentered the battle. As parents, Todd and Ann thought they did everything correctly, and every source we spoke with for this story mentioned what a great family the Stroupe's are and how charismatic Austin is. The consensus is "great kid, but he has a problem."

By the time their son was thirteen, he was so talented at racing that Ann and Todd knew they'd need to make big sacrifices for him to excel. Todd quit his job so he could be around at the Millsaps Training Facility and all the big amateur races. They refrained from being like other "cool" parents who bought alcohol when the local teenagers wanted to have a party. They spoke with Austin and involved him in family decisions. Ann's not embarrassed, but she is sad that her son needs to deal with his problems in such a public manner. She declines to offer advice to other parents, asking, How could she?

After returning home in 2012, Austin quickly found a doctor to give him Percocet for shoulder pain he was experiencing. "It was easy as buying a pack of cigarettes," he says.

The abuse happened in waves, but he couldn't stay clean, and he entered a crisis center outside of Charlotte. That lasted a week. Then he tried a Suboxone program—another drug that can help wean addicts off of opioids—but was kicked out for failing four drug tests. Then his legal trouble began: he was arrested for shoplifting and twice for failure to appear. He spent three days in a Union County jail and eight in the Iredell County Detention Center in Statesville, North Carolina, after turning himself in to serve out a warrant.

Stroupe has trouble today piecing all the charges together: a hit-and-run accident, stolen articles of clothing, failures to appear, "just stupid stuff—I never stopped," he says. "I just kept getting in trouble." Although it was drugs that led to his arrests, he'd never been caught with any on him.

He worked, occasionally at the family chicken and fish fry restaurant—where he remembers ducking out to take naps in his truck—and as a landscaper, where he learned to mulch and sod for \$10 an hour over a five-month period in the summer of 2014. In February of 2015, Stroupe went into the Robert Swain Recovery Center in Black Mountain, North Carolina, which has a substance-abuse-treatment program. It was a decision he made on his own, and he waited a month to get accepted. He completed the program that

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May and stayed clean until March 5, 2016.

"[Addiction is] something that's got such a hold on him," Todd says. "He doesn't want to do these things, or he don't want to do bad things. I think he's smart enough to know that he can't keep heading down this road, so he'll seek help."

The Damage Done

Alone in his hotel room at Hamer, South Carolina's South of the Border MX training facility, Stroupe scrolled through the contacts in his phone. It was Saturday, March 5, and he was supposed to be at the Omaha Arenacross. His third overall in Birmingham was followed by an eleventh in Tampa the following week, and Junior Jackson felt like two different people had ridden for his team on consecutive weekends.

Here's the short version: Stroupe maintains that he was having head-gasket and other engine trouble with the practice bike he was given. It bummed him out and made him leery. Even though Stroupe was using the same equipment that won the 2015 Amsoil Arenacross Championship, the details of what happened in Tampa may never be agreed on. Stroupe says he didn't trust the bike; Jackson says there was ab-

solutely nothing wrong with the machine. After the Tampa round, Jackson says Stroupe told him he wasn't "ready to deal with all of this."

Stroupe had been training at SOB since mid-January, and when he returned on March 5, following some time at home, where he picked up his road bicycle and some cooking supplies, he found the facility completely empty. The owner, Ryan Schafer, and the other riders and staff were at Daytona to watch and compete in the Ricky Carmichael Amateur Supercross. Stroupe called Schafer to see where everyone was. Schafer said he had a friend nearby where Austin could watch the supercross race on TV and be with people.

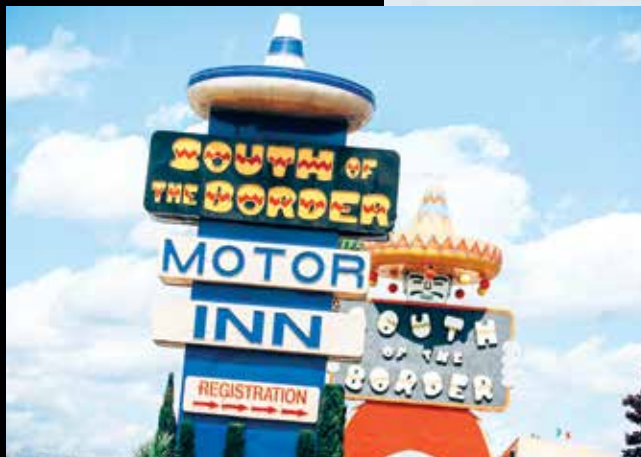
After checking in with Todd, Austin then came across the name of a girl in his phone and called her. "As soon as I thought about contacting her, I knew what my intentions were," he says. Despite the fact that she was 110 miles away in Concord, North Carolina, Stroupe drove there telling himself he was just going to hang out and watch the race.

"I'd be lying if I said that I didn't know that person could get what I needed," he says. "I was just giving myself a reason."

They started with Adder-

all, then Xanax, then heroin. Stroupe stayed in Concord until late on Wednesday, March 9, when he decided he had to get out. At 1:30 a.m. on Thursday, he was pulled over near Wingate, about forty-five minutes south of where he'd started. After a search of his van, he was arrested and charged with two counts of drug possession, two counts of possession of drug paraphernalia, failure to maintain lane control, and a fictitious/expired registration plate. Even though the bond was only \$2,000, he was left in jail for twelve days. That's where he discovered, in an email, that "everyone knows."

"It was heartbreaking,"



After twelve days in jail, Stroupe was released in mid-March on bail and returned to South of the Border MX in Hamer, South Carolina. He hopes to return to racing again someday, but rehabilitation and sobriety are his priorities now.







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he says. "It still is. I'm not really concerned about what people think I was doing before this, because I know I was giving it my heart and giving everything I could to get back to where I was."

Stroupe's case isn't abnormal. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, 40 to 60 percent of addicts who finish a treatment plan relapse. Dr. Cali Estes believes the percentage is way higher. "Relapse is part of getting clean," she says. "Addiction is not an exact science. They didn't get high overnight, but we have this expectation that they get clean overnight."

Asked what he blames specifically for his relapse, Stroupe says, "I think I'm a little weak when it comes to really good decision-making." His biggest regret—"my choice of friends"—ultimately doubles as his best piece of advice to young riders and people who might be battling influence and peer pressure. And while he isn't happy with how he was exposed and the ensuing backlash after his recent arrest, he's prepared to face it, talk about it, and fix it, and he hopes others are too.

"I know a lot of people that are dealing with the same thing.... Mine's just in the open," he says. Schafer,

the owner of SOB, invited Stroupe back to the compound, and his family has embraced him.

The question of a comeback is unavoidable for someone with Stroupe's talent. But first he must ask himself if that's right for him. He loves to cook—a hidden talent—and golf relaxes him. He could find happiness in those pursuits. After twelve days in jail, he told himself he was done with motorcycles, but a day later he was telling himself the opposite. Andre Agassi won tennis majors after battling meth addiction in the middle of his professional career; refocusing and recovering is not impossible.

First, legal troubles need to be sorted, and structure must be built into his days. Ann and Todd still believe there's life in their son's talent, but they want him to be happy, healthy, and free of addiction first. Their primary fear isn't another relapse; it's the thought of their son becoming a statistic that keeps them up at night.

"I don't want anything else to come between my recovery again," Austin says. "I just want to make sure racing wasn't it."

And if it is racing?
"If I can eliminate that factor, I'll be okay." ✕