



WHERE  
THE  
HELL  
IS

**JAMES  
STEWART?**

Has the rider we used to call the fastest man on the planet retired from racing so quickly that we missed it? We try to track down James Stewart

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PHOTOS: **COLLIN SPECKNER**

IT WAS THE EVE OF the Anaheim Supercross opener, and the motorcycle media and a few mainstream outlets were gathered in the Diamond Club of Angel Stadium. Before them was a cloth-covered table, behind which the fastest riders on the planet were all gathered. Well, all but one, and his absence did not go unnoticed.

"Your thoughts on the state of affairs to be missing one of the sport's stars, James Stewart?" one of the reporters asked. "Who wants to take it?"

A collective shrug followed; the riders exchanged glances. Then Red Bull KTM's Ryan Dungey was asked directly. He deferred to Stewart's longtime nemesis Chad Reed, which brought chuckles from the whole room.

"I feel like I'm in a lose-lose," the two-time AMA Supercross Champion tiptoed. "I think it's really sad. . . . You know, putting my differences aside. . . . He has, what, 50 wins? Second all-time, two-time champ. He's got the credentials, and I think it's really sad that he doesn't have a job. I have to think he needs to look in the mirror sometimes and see. . . . I think that's the best way to do it. . . . I'll miss racing him. I don't know if this is it for him or not, though. The [picture] was kind of getting painted, and it's sad that it's kind of turning out this way."



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(Insets) Even early in his life and career, James Stewart was a stand-out racer, winning AMA National Championships from the time he was on a Yamaha PW50 onward. He was also seemingly more comfortable in the spotlight as a youngster than as a professional, perhaps due to the pressure of winning every time he was on a racetrack. (Main) Stewart riding at his compound in November—his one and only public appearance on a motorcycle in 2017.





**T**hat exchange did not take place at the start of the 2018 Monster Energy AMA Supercross Championship, but rather 2017's—yet it would likely play out just the same now. James Stewart is still missing from the sport. Last seen on a motorcycle at his JS7 Ride Day at the Stewart Compound in Florida, he was on a Honda CRF450R, riding with kids who had won classes at his JS7 Spring Championship at Freestone in Texas. Hardly any media was there,

save for *Racer X* contributing photographer Collin Speckner. Playing with his young son, Tabiahs, James looked happy, maybe a little heavy. He did not answer any questions, and then he disappeared again.

Once the fastest man on the planet, Stewart is now virtually a ghost. He missed the entire 2015 season after testing positive for Adderall without the required therapeutic use exemption paperwork. He came back at the 2016 Anaheim opener aboard a Yoshimura Suzuki, only to tangle with Ryan Dungey early and earn a slight concussion. Two more attempted returns

failed. His last supercross was in Santa Clara, California, on April 2, 2016. He rode well but pulled out early with unspecified mechanical issues. He rode a few rounds of Lucas Oil Pro Motocross later that summer, the last on July 23 at Washougal. He pulled out of the second moto and has not been on or near a racetrack since.

**A**fter that Anaheim presser, Stewart posted this on his social media: "It's been 16 years since a Saturday night in [January] came and I wasn't in a stadium doing what I love. But all I

can say is it won't last for long!!! Truly can't tell ya how much I'm looking forward to returning doing it my way. After months of trying to make things happen, I realized that no matter what I would do, it wasn't going to work."

He added this cryptic message: "To all that supported me... I'll see you soon. Too all that didn't... I'll see you soon... For those that tried to break me. Sorry... but you can't get rid of me that easy. Not quite done yet!"

The @therealjs7 post got more than 54,000 likes—but then nothing. His only other post that year was on May 22,



KUHN

JOHNSON

CUBBY



(Above) Stewart turned pro in 2002, 14 days after his 16th birthday, finishing second at Anaheim. One week later in San Diego, he was the winner. (Top) James and his little brother, Malcolm, flank their father, Big James, at the JS7 Ride Day. After being unable to build a team with his brother, Malcolm is racing a privateer Kawasaki in the 2018 Monster Energy AMA Supercross Series.

when he memorialized MotoGP hero Nicky Hayden, who was killed while cycling in Italy.

Racer X's Jason Weigandt tried to find James during the week of the Daytona Supercross, driving right up to the front gate of the Stewart compound. There he found James' little brother, Malcolm, and then Big James, their father. Like always, they were friendly and talkative. They were also the only Stewarts that Weigandt would get to talk to for his magazine feature "Where Is James Stewart?" (June 2017). Big James explained that James wasn't out there be-

cause, after Yoshimura Suzuki folded into RCH Racing and all of the other top factory rides were taken, it was impossible for him to compete without factory electronics, regardless of the bike brand.

"Best rider, best shape, best suspension—there's no way you're winning without the factory electronics," Stewart Sr. said. When asked if James would ever come back to racing, he said without hesitation, "He'll be back."

But it wouldn't be with Suzuki, the brand he'd ridden since parting ways with JGR Yamaha in May of 2012. The brand had

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stuck with him through the WADA debacle in 2014, perhaps recalling that Stewart went 1-1 at the High Point National, days before he was told about the positive test and imminent suspension. Stewart hasn't been near a podium since.

"To be honest with you, since the relationship was severed a couple years ago, we haven't kept track with him," says Suzuki's Pat Alexander when asked about any potential discussions for 2018 and beyond. "Company-wise, Yoshimura made some changes and became a technical sponsor after James left, rather than a racing thing. That's pretty much where we've went with things."

Does Alexander think we'll ever see him on the track again?

"Personally, I don't think so," he says. "He wants to be that #1 guy, and unless he has a factory bike, I don't think he will even entertain the idea. He's a rare individual. But it would probably be the same with Ricky [Carmichael] when

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ROGER LARSEN, SEVEN MX



(Above) Scenes from Stewart's journey through the years include his wiggled-out homage to Rick James, a stare-down with his longtime rival Chad Reed after their run-in at the '09 Jacksonville SX, and celebrating one of his last wins aboard a Yoshimura Suzuki. (Top) Stewart rode a Honda at his ride day but likely would have ridden any brand in 2018 had it come with factory equipment.

he was in the same boat when he was at the end of his career.”

After the 2017 season, the AMA was assigning rider numbers for 2018 when supercross manager Mike Pelletier realized Stewart's #7 was technically up for grabs, as James had not scored a point that season. A call was made to Big James, who said James was not done—both Stewarts would be racing in 2018. He and longtime Stewart friend and manager Roger Larsen of Seven MX, James' clothing company, were working on a team for the brothers, but nothing had come together yet.

“We had every intention of

being at the starting gate at Anaheim 1 2018,” Larsen says. “We did everything we could to put a team together, and RCH Racing sitting down, there were some really good guys out there who were ready to go to work, but then we kept having deals not quite come through, and we were waiting and waiting. . . . In the end, I think we were maybe being jerked around by some people.” Larsen has the tough job of building the Seven MX brand and managing a growing team of top amateur prospects while also fielding questions about the brand's namesake (num-

bersake?) and owner. We've reached out to James numerous times through Larsen, but for the last year, the answer has always been roughly “not right now but maybe later.”

“You could pay James hundreds of thousands of dollars to do something, but he just doesn't want to go anywhere right now,” Larsen says. “We might have a big race or big event coming up, but he would rather be home with his family.”

While James is active with his Seven MX brand, it's mostly from home. He's been getting help and guidance from Eddie Cole, himself a pro racer in the seventies who founded Answer Products, SixSixOne, and Matrix and is now reviving Tag Metals.

Asked if he thinks we'll see #7 on the racetrack again, Cole replies, “That's a really good question, and to be honest, I ask myself the same! We don't really talk much about the racing side—Seven as a brand is completely separate from what James is doing as a racer. It

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EDDIE COLE

Now a husband and father to his young son Tabiahs, James Stewart is obviously cherishing his time at home with his family. What is uncertain is whether we will ever see the rider once hailed as the fastest man on the planet race a dirt bike again.



seems to be kind of a subject that he doesn't really talk about, at least not with me—maybe not with anyone. My sense is that he wants to ride and he's trying to find the right program, but it's not there. He doesn't want to go out there on a stock bike without the right equipment and get 10th or 12th, nor does he want to do it for free. But there's no one standing in line waiting to sign him."

As for working with James, Cole says, "Our working relationship has been fantastic. He's a fast learner and a fast thinker, very creative too. I talk to him on a regular basis. He's active in the business, he gets weekly reports on everything, he understands branding and brand-building—he's a smart guy. I just really hope we haven't seen the last of him on the racetrack."

Cole offers to reach out and see if James might want to talk, but I tell him I've already texted a few times with no response.

**F**or more than a decade, Stewart has had a personal sponsorship deal with Red Bull. As a matter of fact, he left Kawasaki after winning the 2008 AMA Supercross title and sweeping the outdoors 24-0 that summer, in large part because the team had an exclusive deal with Monster Energy and he wanted to stay with Red Bull. Conversely, through thick and thin, Red Bull has stuck with James. But when he made that surprise appearance on a Honda at his house in November, he was wearing a plain Bell helmet without the signature Red Bull colors or logo.

"Right now, like everybody, we're waiting to see what his next move is, or if there even is a next move," Red Bull's Jeremy Mallott says of his long-time friend. "Right now, Red Bull and James Stewart do not have a contract in place for the 2018 season."

Mallott has seen the pressure that Stewart has been under since the moment he turned pro on January 5, 2002.

"The pressure was always on James to win, almost to an unfair expectation, every single time he was out on the track," he says. "At some point, that had to have started to weigh on him. A lot of people probably don't see that he has always been an incredibly shy individual. They'd see his outgoing personality at the races during opening ceremonies, but that's not really him. What we're seeing now—or maybe not seeing—is really him.

"He's had a long and very successful career, by motocross standards," Mallott adds. "He's got his health, he's got his family. Age 30 is a good time to call it. The writing is obviously on the wall, if you really want to see it."

"I think you need to talk to James about it yourself, but I really just don't think he wants to say right now," Larsen says of Stewart's plans. "Something may still come along, so I don't think he really wants to say he's done, whether he is or isn't."

**R**icky Carmichael choreographed his goodbye from racing perfectly over the course of a season. Ryan Villopoto and Jeremy McGrath,

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**JEREMY MALLOTT, RED BULL**

not so much. Ryan Dungey did a championship mic drop last May. Travis Pastrana just sort of bounced off into freestyle and rally car and his own Nitro Circus. Everyone wants to go out on top, and Stewart was once capable of doing so.

But that no longer appears to be the case. At times it was hard to watch him race because there was such a thin line between success and failure. As his catalog of spectacular, violent crashes built, so did the wear on his body. The concussions were alarming, and they took their toll, as did the stigma of the FIM suspension. Is he too proud or too shy to just stand up and take that bow? And does he really owe anybody that?

Maybe James Stewart isn't even done. What is certain is that, as of December 21, 2017—his 32nd birthday—James Stewart hasn't told anyone anything. And he's still not picking up his phone. **X**