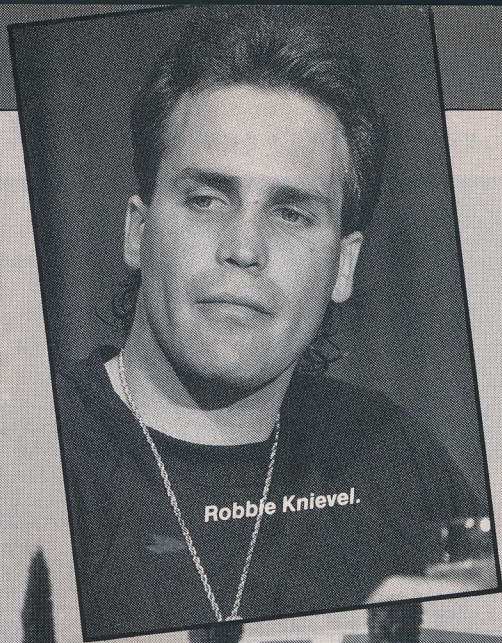


EVEL'S SON TAKES OVER THE BUSINESS

An entertainer, not a daredevil

By "Super Joe" Reed



Evel Knivevel's unsuccessful 1967 Caesar's Palace fountain jump attempt etched motorcycle stunt jumping's massive danger potential in the public's mind.

It was a warm night in the Nevada desert the evening before Robbie Knivevel's now-famous attempt at the jump that nearly killed his father 21 years ago. I had known Robbie only a few days at that point despite our being in the same business, but I knew he'd make it. Knivevel had the equipment and professionalism necessary to approach a stunt like the fountain jump in reasonable safety.

Evel Knivevel was an impressive showman when he faced the fountains in 1967, but he needed more training and technology than he had. He rode a BSA 650. Its short travel suspension and 400 pounds turned Evel's near-vertical, rear-wheel landing into perhaps the most horrifying crash in the history of motor sports. Evel earned instant national recognition as a risk-taker who would lay his life on the line at his shows. That disastrous morning at Caesar's Palace launched a career that included more than 1500 successful public jumps, a film about his life and nearly \$60 million in earnings.

Try to imagine how the thought of jumping the Caesar's Palace fountains haunted Robbie Knivevel. It was the ultimate show business opportunity for the young jumper—the type of story the news and entertain-

ment media live for. No one could forget his father's attempt. Gary Wells, another well-known jumper, had tried the jump and failed on modern machinery, reminding the public of the awesome danger involved.

Where did Robbie get the guts to begin his big-time career by doing the jump that nearly ended his father's life? The story is a bit different than some of the Caesar's Palace publicity implies. It's more a tale of a young man finding his own career rather than of a famous father showing him the ropes and leaving him the family business.

WORKING FOR A LIVING

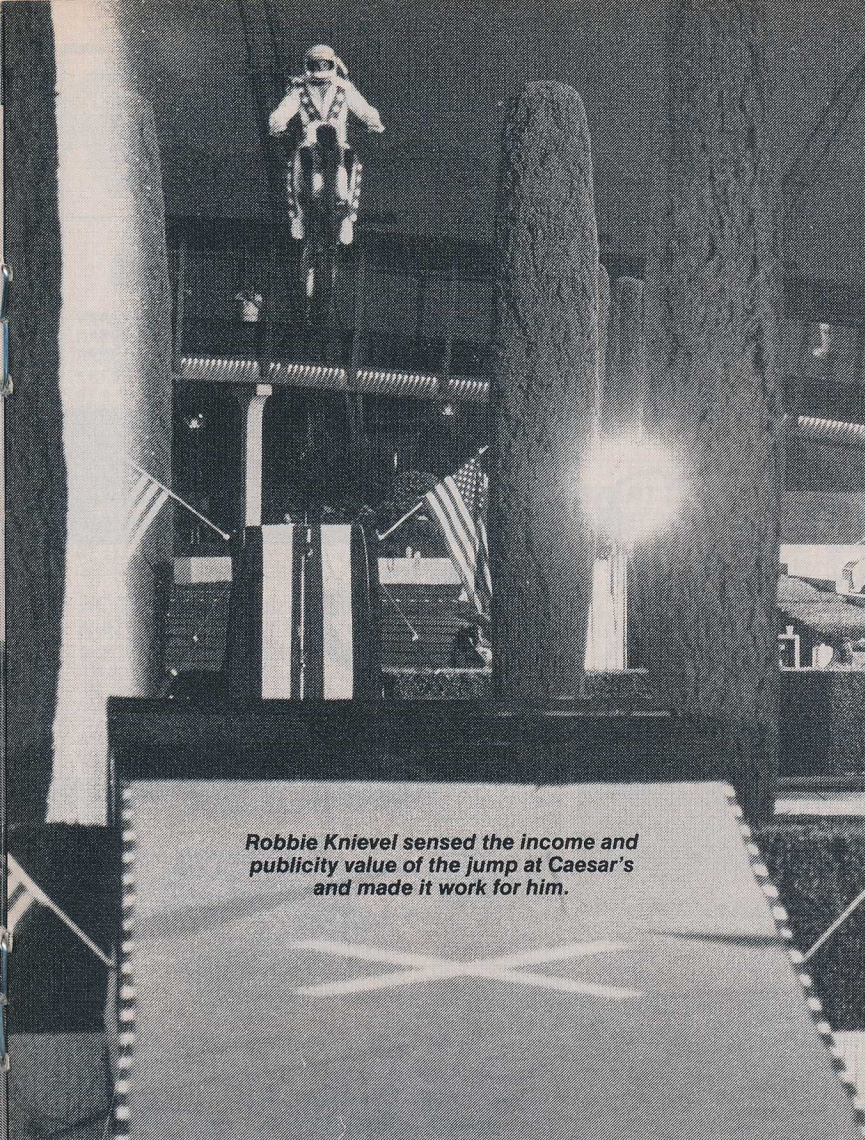
Robbie, like Evel, has an independent spirit, perhaps too much so. He left home at 16 and set about making his own way. "At one point I was living with friends and working part-time at a motorcycle shop. I lived like other motorcycle racers, starting at the bottom, driving an old truck." It's remarkable, given the danger, uncertainty and hard work involved in a motorcycle jumping career, that anyone would choose it. Robbie did, because he knew he had the chance to better his father's records and because of the rewards that would go to him if he did.

At 26, married with a young daughter, Robbie is not in a position to gamble. Unfor-

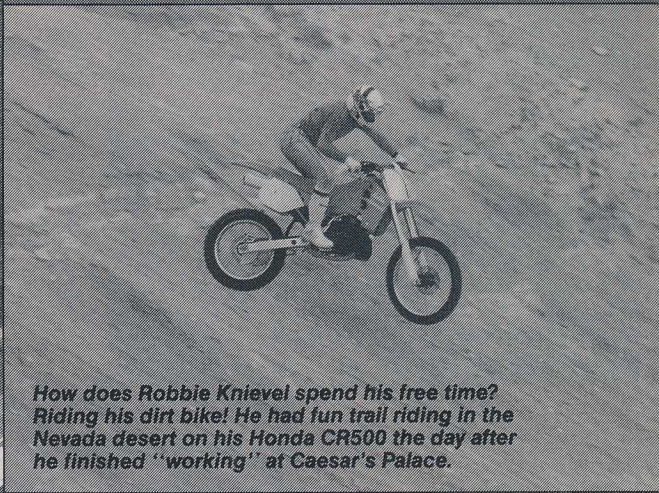
tunately, there's no eliminating all of the risks involved in distance jumping, so he reduced them through practice, like any professional. Professional jumping is like professional racing—you have to do it regularly to be ready for the challenges. Robbie had jumped in Canada, California, Oregon, Texas and Washington before he felt ready for the fountains. "Getting enough sponsorship to tour took me to coliseums, auditoriums and stadiums all over. In some of those places I had to invent a way to get into and out of those buildings for approaches to my take-off ramp and for landings. Stopping was a whole other nightmare. It got pretty hairy in some of those shows, but I learned quite a bit."

JUST DO IT

Robbie had come far enough in his career to take the challenge of the Caesar's jump for everything it was worth. His father, now part of his management team, saw to it. By the day of the jump it was clear that no motorcycle event in America would be as well publicized as Robbie's fountain leap. The jump was broadcast live by satellite world-

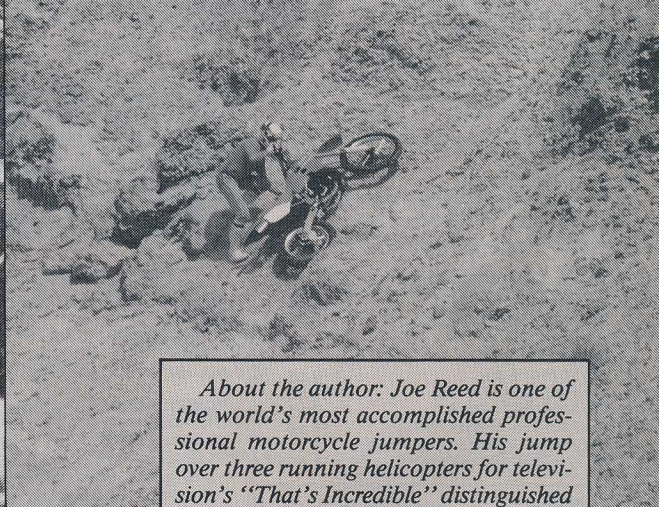


Robbie Knievel sensed the income and publicity value of the jump at Caesar's and made it work for him.



How does Robbie Knievel spend his free time? Riding his dirt bike! He had fun trail riding in the Nevada desert on his Honda CR500 the day after he finished "working" at Caesar's Palace.

Celebrities are human, too.



About the author: Joe Reed is one of the world's most accomplished professional motorcycle jumpers. His jump over three running helicopters for television's "That's Incredible" distinguished him as one of the most daring and creative stunt/entertainment riders. Recently he has managed the considerable talents of the mysterious "Bandit" who jumped from the roof of one Las Vegas casino building to another last year and "The Guardian" who joined the Bandit for a two-rider, side-by-side jump at the same location.

wide and was made available to cable TV viewers on a pay-per-view basis, in addition to the extensive print media coverage. Almost 40,000 spectators crowded the Caesar's Palace grounds to witness the spectacle. Robbie was on his way to becoming the highest-paid (for a single event) rider since his father. His take after the event: a cool one million dollars!

The crowd, cheering and applauding almost continuously since Willie Nelson sang the National Anthem and Robbie began exciting them with warm-up wheelies, hushed as the young rider rode to the top of his take-off ramp. He gave the thumbs-up sign, indicating that he'd jump on his next run. He rode back to a curve in the access road which led to the ramp, giving him a straight shot at his take-off. The unsuccessful Gary Wells had started behind the curve and the turn forced him to run wide. Wells was still correcting from the turn as he left his take-off ramp. His landing was disastrous. Knievel backed out of his charge for the ramp when his Honda CR500 lost traction due to grass in his starting area. The rear tire was throwing a roost of mud and grass high into the air as the tire spun furiously on the pavement.

With the tire cleaned, Knievel prepared to jump. I watched a tape of the history-making pass with Robbie the night after the jump. A close-up at that point shows Knievel shaking his head. To some, it might appear he was having second thoughts but, having been in similar situations, I know differently. "You're clearing your mind there, right?" I asked. "Exactly," Robbie replied. Knievel's run for the ramp was flawless, his landing nearly so, perhaps a foot to the right of the center line. His speed, nearly 90mph, carried him to the underground garage slow-down area. No jumper had ever made it there or heard the crowd's roar behind him. Knievel rode out of the garage and wheeled up the landing ramp where he hopped off his machine and gave the "number one" sign to the crowd. They clearly agreed and returned a deafening cheer.

AFTER WORK

Robbie and I had a good talk after the jump. He was more relaxed and, as you'd expect, we wound up talking about dirt bikes. "Do you think anyone will remember these bikes?" Knievel said, laughingly listing some of the bikes he rode as a youngster. Like many, Robbie started on a Honda 50 Mini-trail. A Yamaha JT-1 Mini Enduro replaced

it, then he got "one of those cool-looking purple Yamaha 100s," a Hodaka motocrosser and then a Harley Baja 100 and a string of Honda CRs and Suzuki RMs. Later Harley-Davidson sponsored the young Knievel's motocross racing efforts by providing SX-250s. Flattracking caught Robbie's eye. He rode a modified Honda to numerous wins. He rode a Can-Am 370 MX in his first public jumps and later switched to the Open-class Hondas he now rides.

For fun, Knievel likes to trail ride in the desert near his Las Vegas, Nevada, home and go golfing. There are more jumps planned but for the moment he's happy to be distracted by his second career—acting. Knievel is currently considering a starring role in a film that will feature both his acting and riding talents. □