



## Disabled drivers conquer Mosport

By [Shane Elliott](#)

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On July 2, Robert Hampson spent his day careening around the corners of Mosport behind the wheel of a Mitsubishi Lancer Evo. The thing is, Hampson is blind.

Imagine your life if you had a disability. How many things might you have to give up on? Walking? Sports?

Now imagine you were a professional race car driver who suffered traumatic brain injuries. Medical professionals tell you, you will never recover, let alone drive again.

Rick Bye must not have received the memo.

In 1998, Bye, one of Canada's most celebrated racers, was driving along a North Carolina highway when he suddenly came face to face with a pair of tractor

trailers. Rick was rushed to hospital with brain damage, a shattered pelvis, a broken ankle and a broken knee. Doctors gave him only a two percent chance of recovery. His body suffered so much trauma he had to be placed into a medically induced coma.

“People usually consider a coma being over once a patient opens his eyes. In my case when I opened my eyes there was still absolutely nobody home,” Rick said. “It was another month before I recall anything at all.”



Rick’s long road to recovery would cost him the next five years of his life. These days, the only hint you might notice that Bye suffered a traumatic injury is a slight limp. He’s pushed his way past a long road of recovery and is now back on his two feet.

He’s also back behind the wheel as a racing instructor and wants everyone to know that the thrill of driving on the race track is something most everyone can experience – even if their bodies face challenges that most of ours don’t.

On a sunny morning at Canadian Tire Motorsport Park, the parking lot outside the new Driver Development Track is packed nearly to the brim, but a few select cars stick out from the pack: a Porsche Cayman, two Porsche 911 Carreras and a Mitsubishi Lancer Ralliart (complete with custom livery).

These cars will soon be screeching tires around the famous Canadian track, and in most cases, with a disabled driver behind the wheel.



One of those drivers is Robert Hampson. Although he is blind, he doesn't believe that's reason to sit on the sidelines. Robert prefers to get right into the action. Though he usually gets around with the help of his loyal service dog Spokane, Hampson's done his fair share of adrenaline-pumping activities to enjoy life to the fullest and race car driving is just his latest endeavour.

"Nothing's impossible. That's what I always say," said Hampson moments after getting out of the Mitsubishi Lancer Ralliart. His face still flush with excitement, he called his drive, "exhilarating – like nothing I've ever experienced before." This coming from a guy who's gone skydiving, scuba diving, rock climbing and water skiing.

The laps Hampson took around the track were not special just because it was his first time on a race track, they were actually his first time driving a car – period. Robert got behind the wheel of the Lancer along with Rick riding shotgun. "I had my hands on the wheel, I was controlling the gas and the brakes," Hampson said. "It was an amazing feeling."

Hampson is always looking for new ways to challenge himself. "After skydiving, I thought what next? And race car driving came to my head," he said.

It was actually Hampson's grandmother who helped inspire Bye to bring everyone together and show what performance driving was like. "My grandmother investigated and stumbled upon Rick. They talked and eventually, this event came

to happen,” Hampson said. “Even if you’re blind or in a wheelchair, no matter what, you can still experience these things like other people. There’s always a way to do something.”

Hampson, despite his disabilities, still has use of his arms and legs. For some others, their disabilities were more severe. Regardless, Bye made sure everyone was able to experience the thrill of racing. With the help of some very skilled driving friends, Rick and his associates took the wheel themselves and personally drove those unable to drive and gave them an experience they’ll never forget.

Disability is obviously a far reaching term. Impairments can range from very mild to very severe and can be physical, neurological or both. With Rick’s help, twenty deserving people suffering disabilities got to experience a feeling most of us might not ever get to. Only eight of the participants were physically able to drive, but those who could not get behind the wheel were still able to ride shotgun and experience the thrill of the track.

Remember that liberating and joyous feeling when you first got your driver’s license? Imagine that, but tenfold, and you might come close to how these new racers felt.



*Gift recipient Austin Riley, Autistic Canadian Karting Racer*

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