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Racer back after recovery

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Dunedin resident Cassandra Campbell is once again competing in speedway racing after a major crash led to a cancer diagnosis and subsequent recovery. PHOTO: GREGOR RICHARDSON

Crashing and being airlifted to hospital was a terrifying experience for speedway racer Cassandra Campbell, but she believes the accident saved her life.

The crash in December last year left the Dunedin resident with a serious head injury — but it also led to the discovery of a cancerous tumour that would have been fatal if left untreated.

Now back on the track, Ms Campbell felt the accident was a stroke of luck — someone was looking out for her, she said.

The beginner speed-racer was helicoptered to Christchurch after crashing into a corner of Beachlands Speedway at about 70kmh.

It seemed like a relatively minor crash, and she was not in pain as she got out of the car.

"But when I took my neck brace and my helmet off my head dropped and I couldn't lift it up ... it was terrifying.

"I started getting all giddy and feeling sick, and then the ambos came over and then it went all downhill pretty quickly from there."

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Earlier this year she was at Dunedin Hospital for an unrelated followup appointment on a floater in her eye that, while annoying, had been deemed harmless.

However, because of her accident, and the fact that she had been treated in another hospital, they decided to do more checks than usual.

A tumour was found so far back it was not impacting her vision, and she was diagnosed with melanoma.

She was told if it had been found in six months' time, she would have been "riddled with cancer" and beyond recovery.



Following plaque radiotherapy in April. PHOTO: SUPPLIED

Given the choice between having her eye removed or undergoing plaque radiotherapy, she chose the latter.

This meant another slow recovery, while she was still dealing with her brain injury and neck pain.

Her eye was swollen shut and she had no depth perception.

"I was sitting there in front of the nurse and I poured my water all over the table, and she's laughing and I'm crying."

Despite the difficulty, she did not believe the cancer would have been found if she had not crashed.

Ever since she was a child she had wanted to try racing, and her partner — who was already an experienced racer — had made the wish a reality.

He did all the work on her race car, so she had dubbed herself the princess.

Pink had always been her favourite colour, and it also stood out amid other cars on the track.

When she saw the sticker "cancer picked the wrong princess" it felt the the perfect addition.

"You did pick the wrong one, because I smashed it out of the park, you weren't taking my eye."

Although women were a minority of racers, their numbers were growing.

"It's just about giving things a go and and breaking stereotypes, because it was one of the main reasons I did it.

"This princess that wears a suit to work, in high heels — I still try and get in a race car and give it a go."

Her doctor had been surprised when she went to get medical clearance to get back behind the wheel. However, as she reminded him, the activity had saved her life.

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She still had her eyesight, and the situation could have been a lot worse, she said.

However, the risk she could loose her sight in future was quite high.

"It's just making the most of being able to see now.

"You take into account colours and random things ... things you never would look at normally and just say 'oh yeah, this is life'."

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