

Drake is back

Teen idol talks about near-fatal crash

EXCLUSIVE

By **MICHAEL GILTZ**

Drake Bell — the talented star of Nickelodeon's hit series "**Drake & Josh**" — is back at work after a year-end car crash that fractured his neck, knocked out six teeth, and left fans wondering if he'd ever be able to perform again.

The other driver was at fault, hitting Bell when he was stopped at a light. But that hasn't made him feel any better about what happened.

"In the beginning, I was like, this is no big deal," says the 19-year-old actor. "My mouth is wired shut, but I can live with this. And then, dude, like three or four weeks into it, I was like, 'This is ridiculous. I still have five weeks to go. Oh, my God. How am I going to do this?'"

"The day they unwired me was the hardest. I couldn't open my mouth at all. I opened it like half an inch, and

I saw stars; I was dizzy. You're clenching your jaw for two and a half months straight."

A teen idol pinup, Bell candidly admits he was worried about his looks.

More important to the young singer-actor — who wrote his show's theme song and just released his promising debut CD, "Telegraph" — was what might happen to his voice.

"I was so scared," says Bell. "I didn't know what I was going to look like. I didn't know if I was going to be able to sing again or talk normally. I have fake teeth and it affects my speech. I have to learn how to say my s's and my t's over again. It's tough."

He took comfort in not being able to shave — suddenly Bell was sporting what he proudly called a "full-on Paul McCartney" beard that must have shocked some of his preteen fans.

"I'm singing again," says Bell, whose only visible result of the crash is a tiny scar across his chin that fans seem to love.

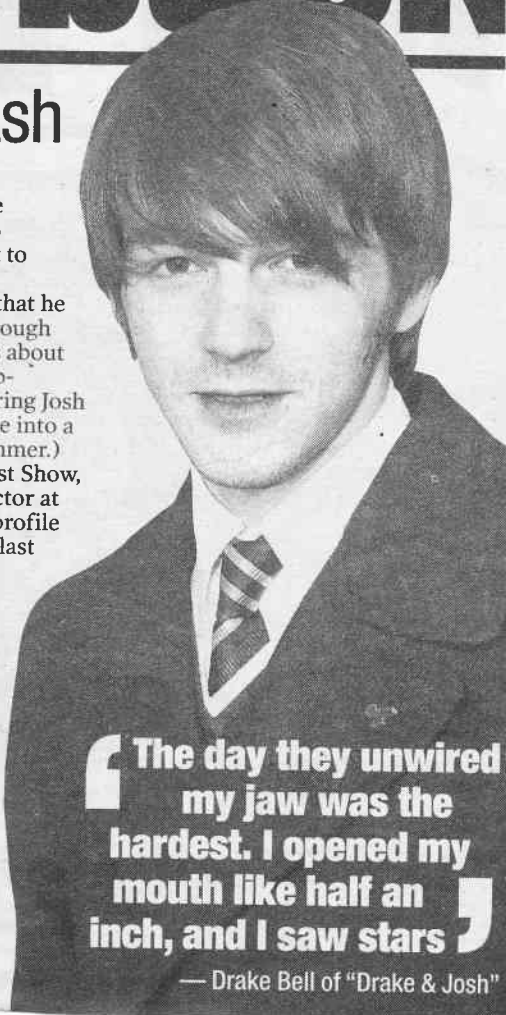
"My jaw pops and cracks and stuff. The doctor says that'll go away; you've just got to give it time."

The good news is that he is back on the set through mid-July. (The series about two mismatched step-brothers — also starring Josh Peck — is being made into a feature film next summer.)

The series won Best Show, and Bell won Best Actor at Nickelodeon's high-profile Kids Choice Awards last month ("I did NOT expect that," says Bell) and Bell is soon going to direct an episode.

He appreciates all the opportunities he has, but he doesn't hype up any sort of revelations that his brush with death might have provided.

"I didn't turn into Cat Stevens or anything," he jokes.



“The day they unwired my jaw was the hardest. I opened my mouth like half an inch, and I saw stars”

— Drake Bell of "Drake & Josh"