

Injured astronaut aboard space shuttle 'in spirit'

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Space shuttle Discovery lifts off from Pad 39A at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla., Thursday, Feb. 24, 2011. Discovery on its last mission to the International Space Station.(AP Photo/John Raoux)

(AP) -- An astronaut who was bumped from space shuttle Discovery's final flight following a bicycle crash told his orbiting friends Friday that he's with them "in spirit."

Injured just last month, Timothy Kopra hobbled on crutches into Mission Control and called Discovery's six astronauts, congratulating them on "an awesome launch" and wishing them well. It was a brief and casual chat, taking place just as the astronauts began inspecting their ship for any signs of launch damage while en route to the [International Space Station](#).

"Can't tell you how much we wish you were here with us as well," said Discovery's commander, Steven Lindsey.

"I'm sure you know that I feel the same way, but I definitely feel like I'm there in spirit," Kopra replied.

Astronaut Michael Barratt teasingly confided that Kopra was aboard the shuttle "in a little bit more than spirit, but we'll have to explain that when we get back."

"All right man, you keep watching us ... let us know if we screw up," Barratt added.

Astronaut Stephen Bowen stepped in to take Kopra's place. [NASA](#) never had to replace a shuttle crew member so close to launch, and Bowen had to train practically nonstop to get up to speed. He performed two spacewalks on the previous shuttle flight last May, and on Thursday became NASA's first astronaut to fly back-to-back missions.

As the crew's lead spacewalker, Kopra, 47, helped develop the procedures for next week's pair of excursions outside the space station. He will assist with the spacewalks from Mission Control.

Still on a high from their dramatic [liftoff](#) with just two seconds to go, Discovery's [astronauts](#) spent their first full day in orbit operating a 100-foot, laser-tipped rod to take a close look at the shuttle wings and nose.

At least four pieces of insulating foam peeled away from the [external fuel tank](#) during Discovery's farewell launch, and some of them apparently struck the shuttle. Officials said the impacts were gentle and occurred late enough in the launch to pose no safety concern.

All the same, Lindsey and his crew followed standard day-after-launch procedure in checking the wings and nose of NASA's most traveled spaceship. The inspections became mandatory following the 2003 Columbia disaster.

Discovery and its all-veteran crew - along with Robonaut 2, the first humanoid robot in space - are due at the space station on Saturday afternoon. Robonaut, R2, will stay behind when the shuttle leaves.

"Look who is coming to dinner!" space station astronaut Catherine Coleman enthused in a tweet.

On its last voyage before being retired and shipped to a museum, Discovery is delivering a compartment full of space station supplies as well as Robonaut 2, or R2. The chamber will be attached to the orbiting lab next week and function as a closet.

Storage space is limited at the 220-mile-high complex and will become even tighter once NASA retires the shuttles this year. Shuttles double as garbage trucks, hauling away trash and old equipment.

Two more shuttle launches remain, Endeavour in April and Atlantis in June.

It was a special day in space for Barratt, who like crewmate Nicole Stott and Kopra lived aboard the space station in 2009. Thursday marked his 200th day in orbit, cumulatively, as the shuttle zoomed after his former home.

"It's great to be back in space again," he radioed, "and I wish everybody could see what we're seeing through our eyes up here."

More information:

NASA: <http://www.nasa.gov/shuttle>

Robonaut: <http://robonaut.jsc.nasa.gov>

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